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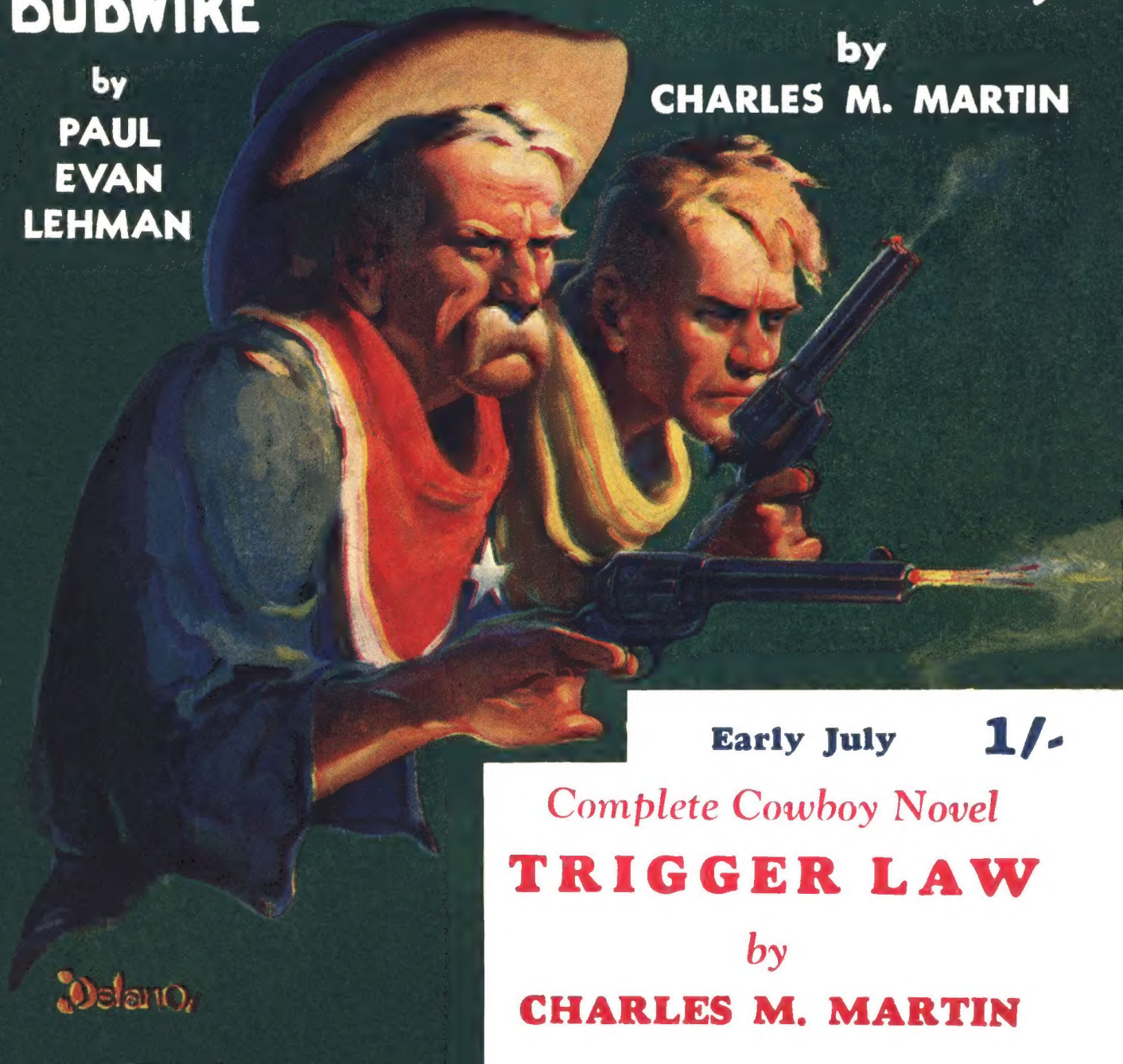
by PAUL EVAN LEHMAN

TRIGGER LAW

An Epic of the Old Wild Days

by CHARLES M. MARTIN



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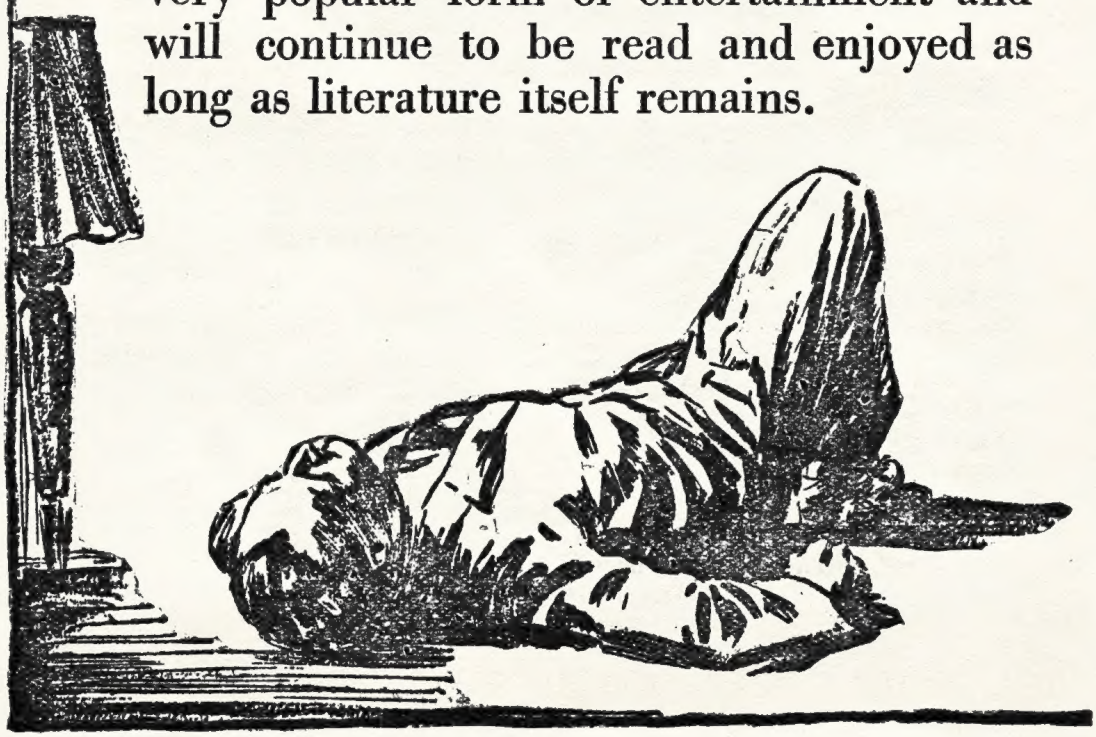

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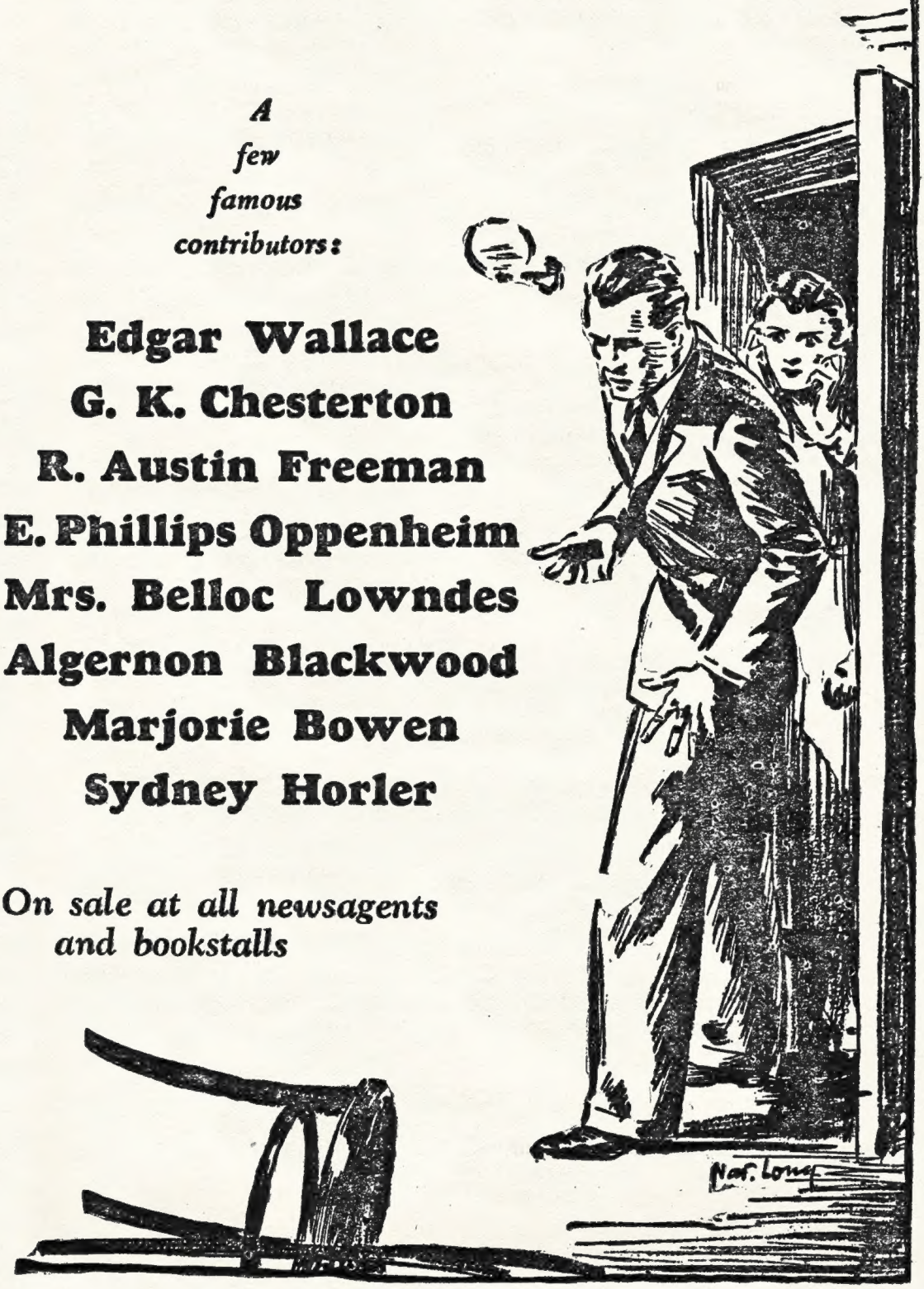

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"That extra ace of spades is the death card!" Trigger Dawson shouted as the two outlaws opened fire.

TWIN ACES IN ONE DECK CALL FOR A BULLET PAYOFF WHEN A KILLER DEALS THE CARDS

Like a hound too hot on the scent to remain with the pack, Sheriff Bradley fogged along some distance ahead of the Tulurosa posse, his faded blue eyes squinted in an effort to see the outlaw whose trail he had followed all day. Then a voice, little louder than a whisper but as grim as the threatening six-gun the speaker held in his hand, abruptly ended the sheriff's perplexity. A tall man stepped out of the brush at the edge of the trail.

"Elevate, Sher'ff Bradley! An' slide offen that hoss easy-like!"

The sheriff half-drew his gun; then allowed it to slog back into the worn holster with a sigh of disappointment. He held his right hand shoulder-high as his left grasped the horn to swing his right leg over and behind the cantle as he stepped to the ground.

Then the thin-faced outlaw stepped forward, his manner mockingly courteous as

COMPLETE NOVEL OF SIX-GUN WEST

TRIGGER LAW

by

CHARLES M. MARTIN

Author of "Tombstone Pistoleers"

he lifted the ancient Peacemaker from the lawman's holster. From the saddle he took the sheriff's rope, flipped a small noose around the officer's hands and bound him to the stunted cedar.

"Jest one peep out of you, sheriff," he warned, "and I'll drill you shore as hell!"

"The boys will git you," the sheriff growled. "You can't git away with it, Trigger Dawson."

The outlaw's face was thin, his voice chill, but his blue eyes were pleasant and

his mouth tended to curl upward. Yet the pantherish set of him, as he worked with the saddle, indicated the constant alertness characteristic of a gun artist. And those who had seen Trigger Dawson in action knew that he had earned his name.

"You done crossed the county line," the outlaw said as he pulled the saddle from his horse's back. "Yore horse is fresh while mine is tuckered out, and they look enough alike to be twins. I'm changin' braunks with you, Sheriff. Keep yuh tail up."

"Adios, Trigger," the sheriff answered quietly. "But I'm tellin' you now that we'll git you an' yore pards for that bank job back in Tulurosa. Black Bill Bowie has gone too far this time, an' you can tell him I said so. Yo're young to die, Trigger Dawson."

The young outlaw smiled grimly. "I've lived twenty-four years so far," he answered quietly. "So long, Sheriff. I'll tell Black Bill what you said."

The sheriff strained against the hard rope as the tall young outlaw cinched the latigo snug and rode up the trail. A few minutes later he heard rifles cracking up ahead just as a member of his posse rode down the trail and saw him tied to the tree.

The sheriff shook his head angrily as the cowboy cut the rope; called over his shoulder as he threw his saddle on the tired roan and cinched tight before mounting.

"Let's git on up ahead," he growled savagely. "Dawson just lit uh shuck up th' trail, an' that shootin' ought to be Sheriff Dave Bowen an' his posse from Don Ana!"

High up on a shelf of the mountain trail, Trigger Dawson was peering through a brush screen at a group of riders approaching the summit from the west. He counted five men all heavily armed for a man-hunt, and his blue eyes became slitted and hard as he stared at the heavy-shouldered deputy coming straight up the trail toward his hiding place. The other four had fanned out with rifles across their knees, and the outlaw mumbled to himself as though he knew the man-hunters.

"Sheriff Bradley is safely tied but here's another posse to be reckoned with. I'm glad Sher'ff Bowen is riding off to the right. I never did like that Mex depity of his, and some day I'm goin' to have to kill him."

Long black mustachios framing thick lips, the Mexican deputy rode slowly up the trail with black eyes darting from side to side. Trigger Dawson settled his boots in the oxbows as he drew his six-guns and rammed home the spurs.

The big roan leaped forward and swept down the trail like a brush-rabbit running from a grass fire as Carlos Mendoza kneed his sorrel aside and reached for his guns. The outlaw chopped a shot with his left hand gun just as the deputy's horse reared high to spin on his heels, and the sorrel fell with a slug in its brain as the deputy kicked his boots loose and threw himself into the brush.

Trigger Dawson was pounding down the steep grade when Mendoza came to his feet and emptied his six-guns at the bobbing rider in the distance. The other members of the posse saw the fugitive and opened fire with their rifles, but the outlaw clattered around a break and disappeared from sight. Three of the posse were after Dawson as Sheriff Dave Bowen rode up to his Mexican deputy with six-gun in hand.

"How many you see, Carlos?" he shouted.

"One," the Mexican answered sourly. "Eet was Trigger Dawson, an' he shoot my horse as you have see."

"Trigger Dawson," the sheriff almost whispered. "Yo're lucky he didn't drill you instead of the hoss. You hurt any?"

"Naw," the swarthy deputy growled. "He make for hide in the brush when I follow the trail. My horse he buck when that *banditto* ride me down, but I get heem, Señor. Carlos Mendoza have been insult!"

Sheriff Bowen sighed. "Now we got to start all over again," he muttered. "We had him in a trap an' you let him spring it an' make his git-away. Yonder comes Sher'ff Bradley from Tulurosa."

"You git the skunk?"

Sheriff Bowen shook his head as Bradley asked the question eagerly. "He got away, Brad," he answered wearily. "I got yore message an' rode out to cut him off, but he jumped my depity right here an' lit a shuck for the lavas after killin' Mendoza's hoss. Three of my boys are after him, but it ain't no use in these badlands."

"Me, I get thees *banditto,*" the Mexican deputy growled savagely. "P'raps it is of a necessity that I track heem to the hole of the Señor Black Bill Bowie, but I get heem of a sure."

The two sheriffs smiled silently. The big deputy glanced at their faces and scowled. Sheriff Bowen kicked his right stirrup loose and toed it toward Mendoza.

"Climb up behind," he said dryly. "Mebbe so we can pick you up a hoss at th' Circle X down in the valley. Beats walkin' in them high-heels of yores."

"We go queeckly to Don Ana," the deputy shouted excitedly. "Trigger Dawson must have food, shereef. And hees gunbelts were almost empty of shells!"

"Gwan," Sheriff Bowen scoffed. "That jibber won't touch no where's near Don Ana, shells or no shells. Besides, it's all of thirty miles back to town."

The big Mexican swore softly in his own tongue and mounted behind Bowen. Sheriff Bradley carried Mendoza's saddle and bridle behind his own cantle and led the way down the trail. He winked at Bowen when the Mexican leaped to the ground in the yard of the Circle X and reached for his rope.

Mendoza noosed a tall bay in one of the corrals; saddled quickly and mounted the pitching horse. After half a dozen bucks he straightened the bay out and shouted at Sheriff Bowen.

"I see you in town, señor. That Treeger Dawson he ees gone there of a sure!"

Sheriff Bowen shrugged his shoulders. "Let him go," he said carelessly. "We got to git back to Don Ana, an' if he wants a hard ride he can fly at it. I'm stoppin' here for dinner before I make that ride back to town."

Carlos Mendoza did not spare the bay as he pounded through the badlands toward Don Ana. He told himself that Sheriff Bowen was getting old, and that the office of sheriff might possibly be filled by a younger man like Carlos Mendoza. He was determined to capture or kill Trigger Dawson as a stepping stone toward the sheriff's badge, and if he could do so right in Don Ana after Sheriff Bowen had openly scoffed at the suggestion, the rest would be easy. Mexican voters were as numerous as Americans in Don Ana county, and the election was only three months away.

It was late afternoon when he reached the adobe shacks on the outskirts of Don Ana. Stopping at the livery barn, he quickly changed saddles to a fresh horse and left the lathered bay in a pole corral to be picked up by the Circle X later.

Mounted again, he rode down the winding street to Wertheim's general store and ground-hitched his horse with trailing reins. An old Jew glanced up from behind a wicker cage and nodded affably. Mendoza shouted a question in the Spanish which Wertheim could speak more fluently than English.

"You see a tall cowboy with blue eyes, wearing black *chapparejos?*"

The old Jew answered quietly in broken English. "I haff seen him, *ja,*" he murmured. "He buy four boxes of forty-five shells and many things to eat."

"Andales!" the Mexican shouted. "Make haste, Jew! Wheech way thees hombre go?"

"He ride a big roan horse," Wertheim explained calmly. "He wear a gray Stet-

son with a checkered wool shirt. Boots of the softest Spanish leather, and two big gons on his legs. You bet me my life that cowboy know how to use them. What he do, Mendoza?"

"He ees outlaw, peeg of a Jew," the Mexican screamed. "Wheech way then did he make for go?"

"So I am a peeg, hein?" Wertheim asked coldly. "This white man he pay cash for what he buy."

He looked down his long hooked nose and smiled softly when Mendoza shook his fist. The deputy did not like the inference that he was not considered a white man, but Wertheim was the richest man in the county and had much to say about local politics in his quiet way. The Mexican quickly changed his face and smiled ruefully.

"I am sorry for what I say, Señor Wertheim," he murmured silkily. "Shereef Bowen is make for get old, and I wanted only to catch thees *banditto* who rob the bank at Tulurosa. I rode in on a fresh horse, and even now thees Trigger Dawson ees make for escape!"

"Ha! You say he is Trigger Dawson?"

"Por Dios," the deputy groaned. "Did I not say so? Queeck now before he escape, Señor."

Wertheim sighed softly and glanced out through a side window. A bobbing dot was just disappearing in the distance, and he pointed a crooked finger at the rider.

"If your manners were better, you might have caught him," he said accusingly. "He rode away from the back just as you come in. I ask him where he goes from here, an' he smiled an' jerked his head toward the Organ Mountains."

Carlos Mendoza whirled on his heel and leaped from the store. Vaulting to the saddle, he spurred away in the direction the outlaw had taken as he pulled the rifle from the scabbard under his leg. Only once did he see the outlaw during the next hour, and the Mexican cursed the tall roan Trigger Dawson had taken from Sheriff Bradley. The roan was the fastest horse in the mountains, and could travel all day and night at a stretch. He would have to catch the outlaw before he reached the badlands again and the Mexican spurred his horse mercilessly.

Brang! A bullet whined close to the deputy's head as he rounded a turn in the trail. Trigger Dawson was sitting the saddle easily, perhaps five hundred yards ahead with rifle in his hands, and he raised it to his shoulder and threw another shot at Mendoza.

The deputy spurred into the brush as the hat flew from his black head, and when he reined back to the trail the outlaw had disappeared into the trail-side brush. Three other riders were spurring down the trail, and Mendoza gigged his horse forward when he recognized Sheriff Dave Bowen. The sheriff eyed the Mexican coldly.

"That was Trigger Dawson, Mendoza," he said grimly. "You knew it, an' you dogged it when he cut down on you with that long gun!"

"I make for chase heem, shereef," the Mexican shouted excitedly. "Like I tell you, he buy the shells and grub at Don Ana. The old Jew he engage me in conversation while the *banditto* escape, and I was make for ride hard when he shoot at me!"

"You talk too much with yore mouth, Mendoza," the sheriff answered gruffly. "That's twice we had him in a trap what you couldn't hold. Git after him. Pronto!"

The four men spread out and started the steep climb. Far ahead through the trees they saw the tall roan slip around a rocky shoulder, and four rifles barked viciously to spray rock splinters. Fearful of an ambush, it was more than half an hour before they reached the shoulder, and Sheriff Bowen shrugged his shoulders disgustedly.

"No use goin' any further tonight," he

Fists Cut Short A Curly Wolf's Howl

growled. "They ain't a sign to show which way he went, an' it will be dark by th' time we git back to th' trail. It's a wonder he didn't kill you, Carlos!"

"Some day I weel meet up weeth heem," the Mexican answered sulkily. "Some time when he cannot run away like the coyote."

"Mebbe you think he's afraid of you?" the sheriff remarked sarcastically.

"Don't he make for run?" the Mexican answered excitedly. "Three times he have run from Carlos Mendoza like the devil was after heem!"

"Dig yore own grave," the sheriff growled. "Let's git back to town before it gits dark."

BLOOD OF THE WILD BUNCH

Trigger Dawson checked the leggy roan as he rounded the rocky shoulder and angled upward through a forest of black-jack. Night was closing in fast, but he urged the roan forward while his blue eyes darted from tree to tree.

Then the fugitive jerked his head to follow the pointing ears of the roan. His right hand was hooked in the belt over his gun, and he had started to draw when a rough voice barked behind and to one side.

"Claw sky, feller! Yo're covered!"

Trigger Dawson turned his head and stared into the muzzle of a forty-five. A stocky rider sat behind the gun on a barrel-chested claybank. A taller man stepped out in front; a sawed-off shotgun at his

hip. His thin face was covered with red stubble, and broken teeth showed between his lips when he spoke in a rasping snarl.

"Your name, feller!"

"Trigger Dawson from th' Pecos River country," the prisoner answered quietly. "What's yore handle?"

"I'll ask the questions. What you doin' up here in the Organs?"

Trigger Dawson shrugged. "You two was watchin' me," he answered. "What's yore guess?"

"On th' dodge, eh?" the slender man said musingly. "That was Sher'ff Bowen's posse pourin' it on you, and you shot high when you threw down on his Mex depity. Been me I'd have plugged him center!"

"It wasn't you," Dawson answered shortly. "I don't know who you gents are, but you ain't th' law, so I can breathe easy."

"Mebbe," the slender man answered in his rasping voice. "I'm Stage-coach Carter, an' that short jigger is Swivel Tatum. That tell you anything?"

"Plenty," Trigger answered. "I give you howdy, gents. Yo're ridin' with the wild bunch, an' I'd admire to meet up with Black Bill Bowie. Heard tell back in Tulurosa that he could use a good gun-hand."

Swivel Tatum spoke up. "You a good gun-hand?" he asked, and there was a faint sneer in his voice.

Trigger Dawson slapped leather in the gloom while the gun in Tatum's hand was pointing toward the ground. Before Tatum could bring the gun up, he was staring into a round hole pointed at his heart. The tall rider smiled and flipped his hand again, and the gun disappeared in the scabbard.

"Just fair to middlin'," he drawled softly. "Now how about leadin' me to Black Bill Bowie?"

"Shore, shore," Stage-coach answered. "We intended to do that all along. Jest step up an' lift his hardware, Swivel."

"Jest a minute," and Dawson's voice was hard. "I'm warning you two jiggers right now not to try that play. I'll pass my word to come peaceful, but I'll match my draw agin yore drop shore as hell if you try to lift my irons. What you say, Stage-coach?"

He crouched over in the saddle as he spoke, with both hands poised above the worn cedar handles of his six-guns. The slender outlaw knew he could kill the stranger, but he also knew that it was just possible for the tall stranger to unlimber and blast him with one and maybe both of the long-barreled Colts. Gray eyes and blue locked for a long moment, and Stage-coach was the first to shrug.

"Like you said," he rasped. "I'll lead on, but Swivel stays behind with a gun on yore back. You'll see th' chief all right."

"That's all I asked you to do in th' first place," Trigger answered shortly. "But if Swivel gits nervous an' drills me, I'll git you before I cash out."

Stage-coach slipped the sawed-off under his coat where it hung by a strap over his right shoulder. Then he pulled the slip-knot of his bridle rein and mounted his horse. Trigger Dawson followed with a grim smile on his tanned face, with Swivel Tatum bringing up the rear.

It was dark in the woods winding among the rocks, but the prisoner knew that he was sky-lined to the man in back of him, because he could see Stage-coach in the same manner. For an hour they rode in silence until they came to a narrow pass where a sentry challenged them. Stage-coach answered raspingly, and the three passed into a narrow draw where a huge fire burned against a great rock in the center.

Trigger Dawson allowed his eyes to dart around without moving his head. Fully a dozen men were leaning against their saddles around the fire; bearded ruffians loaded down with the weapons of their trade. They stared at him with open hostility, and more than one hand dropped down to rest upon a gun butt.

A small log house was built against the wall of the cliff, and a tall man dressed entirely in black ducked his head as he walked through the door and approached the fire. Stage-coach Carter made the introductions in his rasping voice.

"This yere is Black Bill Bowie, stranger. Black Bill, this jigger claims to be Trigger Dawson from th' Pecos River country."

The big outlaw did not speak at once; just stood and stared at Trigger Dawson with dark brown eyes that seemed to flash sparks in the fire-light. Those eyes started at his hat and wandered down over his face; dropped to the guns on his legs and then studied the long fingers before appraising the hand-made boots of Spanish leather.

"Good tools, an' he carries the look of a hand who knows how to use them," he said at last.

Blue eyes widened a trifle as the big outlaw spoke in a soft voice that told plainly of a better than average education. Trigger Dawson had also been making an appraisal, and he noted the fifty-dollar Stetson, hand-made boots, and the gleaming, long-barreled Colts thonged low on the black-clad legs. Black Bill Bowie was a man of tremendous physical and mental strength, and nothing but respect showed on the face of Trigger Dawson.

Disputes In Outlaw's Haven Are Settled By Knuckles And Skulls

"Heard in Tulurosa that you could use a good gun-hand," he said quietly. "I was jugglin' over in my mind whether to ride out an' join up with you, but that posse settled the question when they run me into a trap."

"Tulurosa, eh?" the big man answered thoughtfully. "Mebbe they thought you robbed that bank."

Trigger Dawson nodded. "I was near the bank, but I never got a dollar," he answered. "But jest the same I had two sheriffs poundin' me on the tail since last night. I got this hoss from one of them when he caught up with me."

"That hoss belongs to Sheriff Bradley," Bowie declared positively. "You kill him, Trigger?"

"Naw, only tied him to a tree an' changed saddles. I didn't have nothin' agin Bradley."

Swivel Tatum interrupted. "This Trigger gent is almighty sudden with a hand-gun, chief," he remarked. "But jest the same he shot high when he had that Mex depity under his sights back down the trail from Don Ana. He ain't a killer, an' he don't belong in the pack!"

Trigger Dawson turned slowly to face the short gunman who had dismounted, but was still covering him with his six-gun. His voice was low and flat when he spoke to Tatum.

"Yo're a killer, Tatum. Holster that gun an' draw even with me to back up yore wawa!"

"Grand-stand stuff," Tatum sneered. "I don't like you, feller."

"Play out yore string then," Dawson suggested softly. "Holster that iron an' I'll whittle uh notch shore as hell!"

"It's th' chief's say," Tatum blustered. "But I'll call your bluff sooner or later!"

Trigger Dawson looked at Bowie and waited. The big outlaw stared for a long minute at Tatum and then turned his back. His full voice was warmer when he addressed Dawson.

"I rule the roost here, Dawson. These men jump when I speak, and no one argues. Orders are orders, and the man dies who disobeys. How does that listen to you?"

"Fair enough," Dawson answered promptly. "The way I'm fixed I can't do nothin' else nohow. The law comes near to gittin' me down below, an' I had to talk fast an' positive to keep Stage-coach an' Swivel from smokin' me down right there in that black-jack bosky where we met up. I'll give it a whirl."

"You'll play the string out," Bowie corrected softly. "No man ever quits my gang. Dawson. Once a man is a member, he sticks with the pack for keeps."

Trigger Dawson shrugged. "Suits me," he answered carelessly. "I've always played it a lone hand before, but I'll throw in with you an' try to make a hand. Where do I bed down?"

This time Bowie shrugged. "Suit yourself," he answered. "I sleep in the house, and the other boys make their own beds. Step up an' get acquainted."

Trigger Dawson jerked his head to greet each man as the big outlaw called them by name. Most of them he knew by reputation; all of them fast gunmen with notches on their guns. Cole Manning who was reputed the fastest next to Black Bill himself, and Fanner Thompson who got his name from holding down the trigger and fanning the hammer with the palm of his hand.

All were white men with the exception of a tall slender fellow who answered to the name of Yaqui Yates. Indian was written in the high cheek bones and copper skin; beady black eyes and straight black hair.

"How!" Yaqui grunted the syllable as his right hand rubbed the haft of a thin-bladed knife at the left side of his belt. Dawson had also heard about the half-breed; how he could cut the head from a snake at thirty feet with a throwing knife. The men around the fire watched the tall cowboy as he stripped the riding gear from the tall roan and rubbed him down with a bunch of grass. Black Bill Bowie hunkered down cowboy fashion on his heels and rolled a brownie.

"We have another rule here, Dawson," he said slowly. "I don't stand for fighting between the men with six-guns or knives. When two of us can't get along, we settle it with knuckles and skulls."

"Fair enough," Dawson answered, and then he caught the glances of the other outlaws and stiffened. "So what?" he asked quietly.

"You called th' turn on Swivel Tatum," Bowie said casually. "And Swivel knows th' rule."

Trigger Dawson got slowly to his feet and glanced around the circle of bearded faces. Swivel Tatum was glaring at him on the other side of the fire with his hands opening and closing till the knuckles cracked. His gunbelt was lying on the ground at his feet, and Dawson stared hard when he caught the vicious anticipation in Tatum's eyes. Slowly his hands dropped down to his belt buckles and fumbled with the tongues. The belts dropped from his lean hips as he stepped back, and Black Bill Bowie nodded with quiet satisfaction.

"Turn yore wolf loose, Tatum," Trigger said softly. "Might be I can curry him down for yuh!"

"When you get plenty, just sing right out," Cole Manning interrupted. "Swivel ain't never been bested 'ceptin' the time when he took in too much territory an' crowded Black Bill."

The outlaws got to their feet without a word and formed a circle to the left of the fire. Trigger Dawson stood at one end, with Swivel Tatum at the other. Black Bill Bowie stationed himself in the middle of the ring and watched the two men.

Then he said softly: "Fly at it!"

SKULL AND KNUCKLES

Trigger Dawson had studied his opponent carefully. Shorter in height, but the wide heavy shoulders and long arms promised a crushing power that would be a tremendous advantage at

close range. There was little difference in their weights, and the battered ears of Swivel Tatum told a story of the numerous conflicts he had fought with skull and knuckles.

Tatum had also sized up this tall stranger correctly. Any man who would chance his draw against another man's drop could be depended upon to fight to the finish. He knew the stamina and strength of those long legs; battering force behind the rippling shoulder muscles if the stranger could spear him off to fight at long range. None of Swivel Tatum's battles had been fought at long range except the one with Black Bill, who was built along the same lines as Dawson.

The flames from the stubby oak logs leaped high to light the narrow draw like an ancient arena when men fought with their hands to settle their differences. Great shadows leaped high upon the rocky walls of the cliffs, and not a man among the watchers broke the silence of the high mountains.

Somewhere back in the badlands a hoot owl sounded his mournful call; symbol of hunted men who rode the owl-hoot trail away from the haunts of men. It came like a signal for the attack as the two enemies, facing each other waiting for the other to make the first move, both leaped forward to the center of the ring.

Trigger Dawson shifted his feet like a dancer as he held his left arm out with the right fist cocked at his hip. Swivel Tatum came forward wide-legged, with fingers taloned for a clutching grip. His head was pulled between his wide shoulders as he weaved like a great gorilla from side to side. Trigger Dawson stepped in quickly and flicked his left fist to Tatum's face so fast that the move was lost among the shifting shadows as he danced back. Tatum took the blow with a grunt and rushed forward like a bull, and Dawson sidestepped to clip him behind the ear as the heavy body hurtled past him.

Tatum went down partly from his own mad rush, and partly from the blow behind the ear, and Dawson followed up and waited until the killer scrambled to his feet like a great monkey. Then the tall cowboy stepped in and jabbed to the face with his left while his right crashed forward to sink to the wrist in Tatum's belly.

The squat gunman grunted and shook his great shoulders. Dawson's arm tingled to the shoulder as his fist bounced back from the rubbery sheath of muscles, and he was unprepared for the savage rush that carried him backward to the ground.

He brought up his legs and continued to roll as Tatum crashed on top of him; threw the heavy body a dozen feet with the thrust of his legs and came to his feet with a tight smile on his thin face. Tatum scrambled up on all fours like a creature

of the jungles and leaped forward to crush this wiry stranger in his powerful arms.

Dawson stepped in to meet the attack with arms punching savagely. Four times his fists landed in that grinning face to batter the thick lips before he stepped back and to the side as Tatum rushed him with a bellow of rage.

The men around the fire were working their arms in unison with the tall stranger; their faces as mask-like as his own. Tatum pivoted on one high heel and whirled with astonishing swiftness before Dawson could get set. His long arms darted forward to snatch the tall shifting body against his muscled chest. Trigger Dawson grunted with surprise as the breath was forced from his lungs, and his feet kicked the ground in an attempt to break the grip that threatened to crush his ribs.

A savage roar sounded above the crackling of the flames as Swivel Tatum uttered the triumphant note of the bull ape about to make a kill. Trigger Dawson heard that sound as from a great distance as the blood pounded against his ears. Unless he broke that grip he would be a broken helpless pulp when Tatum finished with him. Eyes would be gouged and his features kicked to a scarred mass of tissue by the heavy boots of this killer who had hated him from the time he had first seen him back in the timber.

Trigger Dawson sagged in those crushing arms in an attempt to get one life-saving breath of air. Swivel Tatum loosened his hands and clutched for a tighter grip which would snap the ribs of this stranger who had called his bluff before the outlaw pack. In that split second the tall cowboy tightened his muscles with a spasmodic jerk as his right knee snapped up into the killer's groin, and both men fell to the ground when Tatum's fingers released their lock.

Spots were dancing before Dawson's eyes as he rolled to his feet, panting for breath like a dog. Tatum was sitting on his haunches with his great arms wrapped around his head, rocking back and forth in agony from the blow in his vitals. Trigger Dawson could have ended the fight right there according to the code of the wild which barred no hold in a battle of fangs and feet.

Now his high chest was heaving as he stepped back and waited for Tatum to get up, and a slow grim smile of confidence settled upon his face. The blue glinted like ice through the slitted lids of his eyes, and he shook his head angrily to sweep away the shreds of fog from his brain.

"Get up," he said quietly in a voice flat and deadly with menace.

Swivel Tatum lowered his great thick arms and lurched slowly to his feet. His face was bloody and torn, but the little greenish eyes glowed with a red fire in their depths seen only in the eyes of killers who prowl in the night. Braced on heavy legs he waddled forward with arms extended for another crushing grip.

Trigger Dawson stepped in like a beam of light as his left fist flashed out to jab the right eye. His breathing was even and regular as he danced in and out with short chops to cut the face of the killer to shreds, and a cold rage was in his heart at the memory of those crushing arms.

Tatum took the blows indifferently as he waddled forward and waited for his chance. Dawson slipped to his knees when his right foot caught under a root, and Tatum saw his chance and kicked with his right foot at the unprotected jaw. Trigger Dawson twisted his body and turned his head just in time, and the thick leg slipped over his shoulder. Dawson was on his feet like a mountain cat as his hands closed around the thick thigh with a vise-like grip. Then he straightened up and lifted with all his strength; crashed the heavy body to earth with a jolt that nearly broke the thick neck.

Swivel Tatum kicked with all his

strength and rolled free with a roar of rage. He was a creature gone loco as he scrambled to his feet and rushed forward with head drawn between his shoulders like a battering ram. Trigger Dawson danced to the side and stuck out his foot, and Tatum plunged to the ground and rolled close to the edges of the fire before he could check his rush. Trigger Dawson was after him like a wolf with feet twinkling in the firelight.

When Tatum came to his feet he met smashing drives to the face that broke his nose and closed his right eye tightly. He covered his face with his arms and rushed again, and the tall cowboy stepped in to meet that lunge as his right fist started from the hip and landed just over the heart.

Ugh! Swivel Tatum was stopped dead as the blow paralyzed his left side. Again that crushing blow was repeated, and the heavy arms began to drop when Tatum's knees started to buckle. Trigger Dawson measured the distance quickly as his right fist started from his boots and whistled up like a screaming shell.

His knuckles landed solidly on the unprotected jaw with a thud that sent flashes of pain clear up to his shoulder as he followed through with all the weight of his body behind the blow. He stepped back with fist cocked for another shot as Swivel Tatum shivered and hung in space for a bare second. Then the killer fell forward without moving his feet, and Dawson stepped back and lowered his hands.

A great weariness spread over his bruised body while he stared at the still body of his enemy. In his heart he knew that Swivel Tatum always would be his enemy, and he was staring at his swollen knuckles when a hand touched him lightly on the shoulder. He turned to look into the dark eyes of Black Bill Bowie, and he breathed deeply when he saw nothing but admiration in the big outlaw's face.

"That was a fight, Dawson," Bowie said quietly. "I've never seen the like; a clean fighter going up against all the dirty tricks that man has learned since he stopped wearing a tail. You whipped him clean, and I am going to make an exception in your case. Strap your belts where they belong while the boys slop that ape down."

"I know what you mean," Dawson answered quietly. "You saw it in his face the same as I did. He won't rest until he kills me by some dirty dry-gulchin' trick!"

"Exactly," the outlaw agreed. "You better call him while the odds are still even. He's coming around now."

Trigger Dawson fastened the buckles of his crossed gunbelts while his blue eyes watched Swivel Tatum. The killer was shaking his great head from side to side like an angry bull, and that same translucent light gleamed redly from his little eyes as he placed his enemy and stared across the flames.

His thick fingers found his gunbelt and hooked it around his middle as he lurched to his feet. His vitality was surprising as he filled his deep chest with the cold mountain air, and his hands were steady as he buckled the belt and faced Trigger Dawson across the fire.

"Rules be damned," he growled thickly. "I'll kill you if I have to fight this whole lousy pack to do it."

Black Bill Bowie flicked his right hand and spoke softly as his gun flashed in the firelight. "I was expecting that, Swivel. You will both draw when I say 'When!' I'll kill the man who makes a pass for his iron before the signal. Get set, you two!"

Swivel Tatum crouched low as his great shoulders hunched forward with right hand poised above his holster. Trigger Dawson was balanced easily on the balls of his feet, but his blue eyes were studying the heavy rivet from which the other's holster swung.

He drew a deep breath as the significance of Tatum's name came to him. "Swivel," because he fired through the bottom of his scabbard without drawing his gun. The holster swiveled on that rivet to turn upward at the touch of the killer's hand. All the men were watching the two battered fighters as a heavy silence fell over the group, broken only by the crackle of the flames.

Trigger Dawson hooked his right hand in the gunbelt above his holster and shifted his feet like a boxer. Swivel Tatum was grinning like an ape as the blood dripped from his battered face. Black Bill Bowie straightened up and cleared his throat suggestively. Then his lips opened on a single word.

"When!"

Tatum slapped down at the swivel holster like a cat striking at a ball. The right hand of Trigger Dawson blurred in the glow of the fire like a wisp of smoke blown by the wind. Red flame flashed from his blurring hand just as the open holster tilted up to send a crashing echo to his shot, and Swivel Tatum jerked to the left as his slug jerked the calf-skin vest under Dawson's left arm.

The tall cowboy leaped to the right and chopped another shot with a down-sweep of his wrist before Tatum could swing around to bring his holster in line. Dawson holstered his smoking Colt with a smooth movement as a black dot appeared suddenly at the bridge of Tatum's nose squarely between his eyes.

Even then the man's tremendous vitality kept him on his feet as his arm jerked with a last subconscious effort to swivel the holster that had earned him his name. Every man in the wild bunch held his breath while they watched the thick fingers loosen on the cut-away holster, and every man breathed a sigh of relief when the heavy body toppled slowly forward and bounced from the fall. Trigger Dawson was watching Black Bill Bowie.

"Fast," the outlaw barely murmured. "Fastest man in the pack with one exception. I'm that exception, Dawson!"

"That's why yo're high man," the tall cowboy answered quietly. "He asked for it, chief."

The big outlaw smiled with quiet satisfaction, but his eyes were thoughtful as he turned to study the face of Cole Manning. Jealousy was written plainly on the face of the tall slender gunman who was even now rubbing the worn handles of his guns with the palms of his hands. Then Bowie shrugged with fatalistic resignation.

"You and Cole Manning will make a hard team to beat," he said quietly. "There isn't the flicker of a snake's tongue between you. That's the best way, so you two get along together."

If Trigger Dawson heard he gave no sign. He was bathing his face in the cold trickle of a little spring, and when he turned back to the fire the men were rolling between their blankets. Cole Manning was stalking across the draw to stand sentry as the newest member of the Bowie gang pulled off his tight boots and crawled between his blankets.

SIDE WINDER STRIKES

The outlaw hide-out presented a busy scene the following morning with each man taking care of his horse and riding gear, and his weapons. Trigger Dawson studied the horses carefully, observed many of them were from blooded stock. Horses were as important to the lives of the outlaws as were the heavy guns thonged low on their legs.

Black Bill Bowie saddled up a tall blood bay and rode through the draw and down the trail on some business of his own. Cole Manning was cleaning his silver-mounted Colts one at a time, and Trigger Dawson caught the speculative look in the dark eyes of the tall gunman in the occasional glances cast his way. He was also busy cleaning his guns, and when he had loaded the cylinders, he grasped the worn cedar handles and carefully tested the balances before sheathing the guns in the scabbards on his legs.

He glanced up in time to see the eyes of Cole Manning watching him again, and the tall gunman averted his gaze and stared hard at the freshest of four mounds near the rocky wall at the far end of the draw. Manning spoke softly without looking at him.

"Swivel is the fourth in a month," he almost whispered. "I wonder who will be the next?"

"I wonder," Dawson repeated as softly. "Like Swivel said last night, I ain't a natural killer."

Cole Manning moved away without answering and began to groom his horse. Dawson watched the black gelding as the velvety muzzle caressed the back of the tall gunman's neck. Then he brushed the tall roan from the neck to heels until the big black cook beat on a wagon tire for dinner. The cook answered to the name of Ebony, and his white teeth flashed a smile at Dawson as he pointed to an empty chair at the long table outside the cookshack.

"Reckon Mister Swivel won't need his cheer no mo'," he said with a chuckle. "Fly at it, white folks, befo' I throws hit in de fire!"

The men ate in silence; pushed back their chairs and reached for the makin's. Stage-coach Carter riffled a deck of cards suggestively and spoke to Cole Manning while his eyes stared hard at Trigger Dawson.

"How about uh li'l four-handed poker?" he asked. "Fanner an' me is nearly broke an' needs some quick dinero."

Manning glanced at Dawson. "You in?"

Dawson nodded. "I'll play," he answered. "Any special rules up here?"

"Th' sky's the limit, but the chief don't let no men bet his riding gear or six-guns," Carter answered with a smile. "Let's make it draw."

Each man nodded as he looked at them in turn, and the dishes were pushed away from one of the tables. Trigger sat opposite Stage-coach Carter, and he could see the stock of the sawed-off snuggled against the outlaw's right shoulder under the loose coat. Manning sat next to Dawson with Thompson at the end, and Carter shuffled the deck and began to deal. They played for a few minutes with nominal bets until the deal got back around to Carter. After the draw, Dawson palmed his hand and shoved in a stack of blues.

"I'll bet fifty," he said briefly.

Carter threw his cards to the center of the table, and Thompson stayed. Cole Manning studied the corners of his cards and shoved in two stacks of blues.

"Raise you fifty," he said quietly.

Thompson threw his hand away with a grimace of disgust, and Trigger Dawson cornered his cards for another look. He studied the three aces and a pair of eights for a moment; pushed in another stack of blues with a sigh.

"Raise you fifty," he murmured.

"I'll see you."

Manning shoved in his chips as Trigger made his spread. The tall gunman stared at the three aces for a long moment. Then he picked up the discard and slipped his hand in the deck. Stage-coach Carter glanced at Thompson with just the flicker of his lids.

"Beats me," Cole Manning murmured. "Yore deal, Fanner,"

The deal went around the table again with Dawson winning one hand and losing two. Stage-coach riffled the cards and shuffled expertly; dealt the cards and waited for the draw.

Dawson said: "Give me one!"

"Two here," Manning almost whispered.

Thompson and Carter drew two apiece, and Trigger Dawson palmed his cards and stared at the corners. Again he held three aces backed up with a pair of nines, and he booked the cards in the palm of his hand as he leaned back.

"Check the bet," he said.

"I'm betting fifty," Manning announced, and shoved in a stack of blues.

"I'll stay," said Thompson, and Carter threw his hand in the discards. "You gents is drawin' too good for me."

"Raise it fifty," Trigger Dawson murmured. "Come easy; go easy."

Cole Manning laid his cards face-down on the table. His dark eyes were on Carter's face while he spoke to Dawson, and Stage-coach shifted his right shoulder a little to the side.

"You ain't dealing, but I'll bet you fifty on the side you got three aces, Dawson. Three aces and a little pair!"

"You ain't dealing either, an' the cards ain't marked," Dawson answered softly. "Lookin' in my own hand, I can't rightly call yore side bet."

Cole Manning spread his cards with his left hand. Three kings and a pair of aces; one spades, one hearts stared up at the sky. Trigger Dawson's lips were stiff when he spoke.

"In most decks there is only four aces; this one carries two top-side shovels." He showed his hand: A pair of nines, three aces, and a twin to Manning's ace of spades among them.

"Four mounds on boot hill, and the death card out again!" Cole Manning answered softly. "I mean that extra ace of spades!"

Trigger Dawson started to speak and caught his breath. Cole Manning was staring at Stage-coach Carter, and the shifty dealer was staring back as intently. Fanner Thompson had both feet on the floor and his hands hooked in his gunbelt. The tall dark gunman spoke softly, but his tones were flat as brass.

"I been watching Dawson, an' he played clean. You tried to fan a blaze, Carter, an' she's still yore deal. I saw you flip that ace out of yore sleeve."

His hand slipped down to his right leg as he kicked his chair back. Fanner Thompson cut in and took the play away from Carter as his gun leaped forward with the left hand chopping down to fan the hammer. Cole Manning drew and shot with one swift movement before that slapping palm could touch the filed hammer, and then Trigger Dawson threw all his speed into the shoulder twitch that drove his hand down to his own gun.

Stage-coach Carter had leaped back to spill his chair as his right shoulder dipped down to throw the sawed-off from under his coat. Trigger Dawson drew and shot from the hip as the murder gun tilted up to cover Cole Manning.

Carter was knocked sideways as his fingers pressed the double triggers to scatter a hail of buckshot against the cook-shack, and the recoil kicked him backward to the ground. Cole Manning recovered his balance and wheeled with gun covering the fallen man, but the dry voice of Trigger Dawson stopped his pressing trigger-finger.

"He's through, Manning. Sorry to chip in on yore play, but he's got a slug through the ticker. You got good eyes, *amigo!*"

The tall gunman turned and studied Dawson. "He was a sidewinder," he remarked coldly. "The kind that don't rattle a warning. I'm thanking you, Trigger Dawson!"

"Es nada," Dawson shrugged. "The cards was stacked agin the both of us."

"It might be nothing to you," Manning

insisted quietly. "But I happen to know that scatter-gun was loaded with sixteen buckshot to th' barrel. He aimed to blow a hole through me when Fanner Thompson made his play to get my attention. I was right in line with that load, an' I've seen Stage-coach use that murder gun before."

"Frame-up," Dawson answered thoughtfully. "He planted that extra ace in my hand to spill a show-down between me an' you. Lucky you seen the play an' called the turn. Two more graves on Boot Hill, an' they wasn't meant for neither you nor me. Yo're bigger than average, Cole Manning!"

The tall gunman turned his back and closed his eyes. For a long moment he seemed lost in thought while Dawson waited and the other men watched carefully. Then Manning holstered his gun with a smooth flip and held out his *right* hand; something no gun-fighter ever does unless he is absolutely sure of his man.

"You said *amigo*," he began softly. "I'll be glad to call you friend, Trigger Dawson. Want to shake on it?"

The tall cowboy's right hand shot out and gripped the long fingers like a vise. "Proud to do it, Cole," he answered sincerely. "We're evens up on this li'l deal, but we're in another hole when Black Bill Bowie comes ridin' back."

Cole Manning shrugged. "I'll take a chance," he muttered.

Walking over to his big black horse, he took down his rope and swung up to the saddle. Then he shook a small noose through the hondo and snared the right boot of Stage-coach Carter where it stuck up against the table. After which he started across the draw toward Boot Hill like a cowboy dragging a calf to the branding fire. Returning to the table, he did the same with the corpse of Fanner Thompson and rode back to swing down from his horse just as Black Bill Bowie rode through the mouth of the draw.

Cole Manning dropped his hands and loosened the long guns in his holsters; turned back to meet the big outlaw who looked neither to the right or left as he cantered across the draw and drew rein. For a long moment Bowie stared down at the bodies of the dead outlaws; neck-reined the blood bay and rode to the pole corral where Ebony was waiting to take the horse.

The men stood leaning against the table as Bowie walked up to the group. Slowly the black eyes swung from man to man to examine the six-guns on their legs; stopped for a moment when they rested on Cole Manning. Continued on to Trigger Dawson and stopped again when he saw the gray smoke smudges on the gleaming black barrel of the right-hand gun. His eyes swung back to the dark face of the tall gunman before he spoke in that strangely cultured voice.

"You know the rules, Manning. I said no gun-play between my men!"

"Circumstances altered cases," Manning answered quietly. "Stage-coach was a side-winder, and he planted th' death card in th' deck we was using. He drawed it himself."

"Was Dawson in that game?" Bowie asked softly.

Manning nodded. "Stage-coach dealt me two aces, an' he gave Dawson three of the same. Th' extra ace was spades; a bullet!"

"And you called him," Bowie answered. "You always did have good eyes, Cole."

"Thompson went for his gun with his left hand slapping," the tall gunman explained. "While I was getting him ready for burial, Stage-coach unlimbered his murder gun an' started to cut down on me."

"Then Dawson bought chips and coppered Carter's bet," Bowie interrupted. "After which you an' him shook hands an' decided to be friends."

Cole Manning answered with dignity. "That's right!"

"But I make the rules here," Bowie said softly. "I said no gun-play, and you know the answer."

The tall gunman sighed softly. "I know the rules," he answered. "The man who fired the first shot faces you at ten paces. Fanner Thompson went down first, Black Bill. That was because I beat him to the gun and shot first."

THE FASTEST GUN

Black Bill Bowie looked at the tall gunman, and there was a trace of regret in his black eyes while he slowly shook his head. The lounging men shifted their feet uneasily, and Cole Manning pulled the latigo and stripped the saddle from his horse. He laid the embossed saddle on its side so that the skirts would dry; stripped the bridle and hung it on the silver horn. After turning the black into the corral he turned to face Bowie.

"You'd have done the same, Black Bill," he said quietly. "It was show-down with the death card out!"

"I know," Bowie answered. "Like now."

"Reckon you are right," Manning agreed. "Show-down between you and me with a hole on Boot Hill for the loser. Last night you said I was the fastest gun in the crowd excepting yourself. I thought different then, and I still do."

His black eyes glowed with a strange fanatical fire as Bowie stared at Manning. He balanced himself easily on the thin soles of his fancy boots, and his nostrils flared like those of a race horse. His long-fingered hands hung loosely at his sides, and the white ivory grips of his guns gleamed under the long black coat.

"You think you are faster with a hand-gun than me?" he asked incredulously. "You think you have a chance?"

Cole Manning shrugged with characteristic fatalism. *"Quien sabe?"* he answered softly. "Who knows, Black Bill?"

"I made the rules and I keep them myself," Bowie said slowly. "You are the best man in the pack next to myself. One of us is going to die, Cole Manning. I am sure that it is going to be you, but in case you have gambler's luck, I'll match you. If your gun is faster than mine; if you beat me and live to tell about it, you're the head of the pack. The fastest gun will decide the issue!"

"Fair enough," Manning answered without emotion. "In your own way you have always been a square-shooter, Bowie!"

"Thank you. We'll let your friend Trigger Dawson say the word."

"A man couldn't ask for more," Manning agreed.

"Just a minute! Friends come scarce

with me the way I travel," Trigger Dawson interrupted quickly, and his voice was thick with uncertainty. "It ain't what you'd call a fair shake, Bowie. I was in that ruckus as deep as Manning, and both them sidewinders asked for their needin's."

"Rules are rules," Bowie answered coldly, but there was a warm light of admiration in his dark eyes. "In a gang like ours, each man is important to the safety of all the others. When you ride the owl-hoot trail it's a short life and a merry one, and most of us die with our boots on. The rule was that the man who fired the first shot in a gun ruckus had to face me. That's all, Dawson!"

Cole Manning held out his hand to Trigger Dawson. "I'd do the same for you, pard," he said softly. "I'm faster than Black Bill, so give us the word and we will both know we are getting a fair shake."

Trigger Dawson's hard face softened for a moment while he gripped the tall gunman's hand. Then the smile faded from his face as he stepped back between the two men. Bowie turned on his heel to face Cole Manning; settled himself easily and waited. Manning stepped back and shifted his feet for balance as his shoulders fell forward in the gunman's crouch. Trigger Dawson cleared his throat.

"When!"

Cole Manning twitched his shoulders down in a lurch that drove his clutching hands down like striking snakes. His thumbs found the hammers as he drew smoothly from the oiled holsters. Black Bill Bowie seemed to wait a fraction of time before he started. Then his right hand raced down and up in a swiveling arc with the speed of light, and the heavy gun roared sullenly just as it cleared the lip of the holster. The guns in the hands of Cole Manning blasted a double echo so close on the heels of Bowie's shot that they sounded almost like one.

Both men jerked back, but Cole Manning went to his knees and sagged forward on his face as the two guns fell from his hands and bounced a few feet beyond. Bowie staggered and caught himself; faced the crowd with the smoking gun while his smooth voice addressed Trigger Dawson.

"Was it a fair shake?"

"It shore was," Dawson answered in a low voice. "As square as I ever saw."

"Anything you want from me, Dawson?"

Bowie holstered his gun and faced Trigger Dawson squarely as he asked the question in that low cultured voice. Dawson glanced at him; turned his face to stare at the sprawling body of Cole Manning.

"Yeah," he answered slowly. "You can give me the leave to bury my friend by my lonesome. He'd do the same for me."

Bowie nodded while understanding lighted his smooth tanned face. "I know," he agreed quietly. "You have my permission. Cole Manning was a brave man, and a gentleman. Take him away, Dawson!"

Trigger Dawson caught up the bridle from Manning's saddle and walked into the corral. He bridled the black and led him outside; bolted the heavy saddle to the satiny back and spoke gently to the horse. Then he stooped down and lifted the tall figure of Cole Manning in his long arms and draped it across the saddle. The hard-faced men watched as he led the black across the draw to Boot Hill and laid the body on the ground.

An hour later Trigger Dawson covered the grave and took off his gray Stetson.

No Law Save Bullets Can Avenge The Blood Of An Owl-Hoot Partner

His voice was barely audible when he spoke with bowed head above the mound.

"I taken up for you, pard. This thing will still be decided by the fastest gun!"

He led the black to the corral and stripped the riding gear before turning the horse into the enclosure. Ebony met him as he turned away, and the tall cowboy saw the look of fear on the big darky's face.

"Boss man he want you in th' house," the cook whispered. "He's goin to kill you fo' shore, Mister Dawson!"

"Thanks, Ebony," Dawson answered with a grim smile. "But he won't kill me tonight."

"What's de reason as how he won't?" the black man asked in a whisper. "I seen it in his eye, cowboy!"

Trigger Dawson started to speak and then changed his mind. The big cook stared at him as he high-heeled it across the rocky draw and entered the log house. Black Bill was standing in front of a stone fireplace, and he nodded when Trigger entered the front door. Yaqui Yates was standing at the side window staring at the high mountains with steady black eyes.

"You put him away proper?"

Dawson nodded. "The best I could," he answered quietly. "Ebony said you wanted to see me."

Bowie studied him for a moment before answering. "You are a good man, Dawson," he said at last. "I've been trying to place you ever since you got here last night. Usually I don't ask many questions, but now I admit that I am frankly curious. Just who are you?"

"The handle is Trigger Dawson," the tall cowboy answered coldly.

"Trigger Dawson," the big outlaw repeated, and there was the same questioning gleam in his dark eyes. "From the Pecos River country."

"That's it," Dawson agreed. "On the dodge like yore men reported."

"Something funny about that," Bowie answered. "My men robbed that bank in Tulurosa and got away without any trouble. You was there because Yaqui saw you near the bank when they rode away. Then Sheriff Bradley gets you on the run and sends word over to Sheriff Bowen at Don Ana. We heard you was coming, and I saw the whole play myself when that Mex deputy chased you into a trap."

Now it was Dawson who stared. "You say you knew I was comin'?" he asked.

Bowie nodded with a faint smile. "It's my business to know things," he answered quietly. "Being on the dodge, why didn't you kill Mendoza when you had a chance?"

"My hoss jumped," Dawson explained. "Made me shoot high jest uh little or I'd have had that Mex depity."

Bowie shook his head slowly from side to side. "It won't do, Dawson," he said. "After seeing you handle your hardware last night, I decided that you had reasons of your own for throwing off on Mendoza. Something about you is damn familiar."

Trigger Dawson shrugged. "I ain't askin' you what yore right name is," he answered sullenly.

The big outlaw stiffened. "The name is Bowie," he said distinctly, and the half-breed turned from the window at the menace in the low voice. "Black Bill Bowie," the outlaw added.

"Suits me," the cowboy answered. "An' like I said, my name is Trigger Dawson."

"I could use you and make it worth your while if I could trust you," the outlaw answered, and there was a note of regret in his soft voice. As though he were hoping that he was wrong.

"Meanin' just what?" Dawson asked guardedly.

"Swivel Tatum, Stage-coach Carter, Fanner Thompson, and now Cole Manning," the big outlaw counted slowly. "Four good men in their respective lines, and Cole Manning was like my right hand next to Yaqui."

"There's eight or nine men left out

there," Dawson answered. "Ten with Ebony and the breed yonder."

"Careful," Bowie warned, and Dawson turned in time to see the Indian glaring at him with anger in his beady eyes, and his right hand stealing down toward the knife at his belt.

"Don't draw that *cuchillo*," Dawson whispered.

His hands were hooked in the gunbelts above his holster as he spoke, and the breed stopped his hand with a sigh. Bowie watched the two men without attempting to interfere, and he smiled with his lips when the Yaqui returned to the window.

"In a way you are responsible for the loss of all my men," he said to Dawson. "You are touchy on the trigger, Dawson."

"That's how come my handle," the cowboy agreed dryly. "You know yoreself that a gent on the dodge has to take care of hisself wherever he happens to be."

"Just last night I was telling Cole Manning that you were the fastest hand with a gun in the gang, with the exception of myself. We could go far together, Dawson."

"Meanin' we can't git along?" the cowboy asked.

"That part is up to you," Bowie answered with a shrug. "You have seen me take care of myself."

"I could say the same to you," Dawson replied. "Talk turkey, chief."

Black Bill Bowie changed in an instant. Gone was the smooth mask of tolerance as his black eyes blazed arrogantly, and again the half-breed turned from the window when the big outlaw raised his voice.

"Damn you," he shouted. "You either tell me who you are or you will get the same as Cole Manning got!"

"Not tonight I won't," Dawson answered quietly, and his voice was a strange contrast to the tones of the outlaw. "I never take advantage of a man, chief. I saw that slug from Manning's right-hand gun slap you in the left shoulder."

The big outlaw glared for a moment and then smiled. "I'm sorry I lost my head," he apologized. "You have good eyes, Dawson."

"It was jest a flesh wound, but you lost plenty of blood," the cowboy answered. "Yo're the boss here, Black Bill, an' you set a damn good example. All the men say that you have never been known to take an advantage. Some day you might call me for a show-down, but not tonight when your shoulder's hurt. I don't take any advantages either."

"Now I know why Cole Manning shook hands with you, Dawson," the outlaw murmured. "I'd do the same myself, if it wasn't for that doubt in the back of my mind. Now you better go an' turn in with the boys before they think something is wrong."

Dawson nodded and turned toward the door. "*Buenos Noches*," he muttered. "Hope you don't have no trouble with that arm, chief."

"Just a moment, Dawson; I'm asking you for the last time. Who are you?"

Trigger Dawson shrugged in the doorway. "I might be the fastest gun," he answered softly, and walked away from the house.

GREED COILS A NOOSE

Trigger Dawson was seated behind the cook-shack the following morning when a rider galloped across the draw from the pass and slid his horse to a stop as Ebony stepped through the door. Dawson had wanted to be alone to think things out, and his blue eyes narrowed when the big cook greeted the rider by name.

"Iffen it hain't Faro Tuttle," he chuckled. "You got news for Mistah Bowie, gamblin' man?"

Faro Tuttle jerked his head in answer as his cold gray eyes swept through the shack across the draw. He was a little man with long fingers and a white face,

and when he spoke to the big cook his voice carried a sharp edge that penetrated through the shack like a knife.

"Tell Black Bill that the old Jew got ten thousand in last night," he whispered loudly. "It will be a cinch for five men to make the haul, but Mendoza has a plan to make things look good. Now listen close, Ebony."

Trigger Dawson held his breath while the little gambler talked in a low voice. His quick mind told him that Faro Tuttle was probably a dealer for one of the games in Don Ana, and one of the sources from which Black Bill Bowie obtained his information.

With Carlos Mendoza definitely a part of the outlaw's gang, Dawson could now understand how Bowie knew of the trap that had almost closed about him the day he was caught between the two posses. His face was hard as he listened to the little gambler out in front.

"Sooner or later Sheriff Bowen is going to get up a big posse and raid this hide-out," Tuttle whispered. "Mendoza says you got a new man here who escaped after the Tulurosa hold-up. Send him down with the gang, and give him orders to kill the sheriff. Mendoza will arrange to have Sheriff Bowen there after the boys have cleaned out old Wertheim, and when this Dawson finishes the sheriff off, the Mex will get Dawson for the robbery. That way Mendoza will be the next sheriff, and the gang will be safe."

"This Trigger Dawson he a mighty sudden gent with his guns," the big cook answered softly. "Seems kinda low-down to frame him up thataway!"

"You take that message to Black Bill," the gambler growled angrily. "He figgered out most of the details for the robbery, and the way Mendoza has framed it, this new long rider can be the goat. Tell him that Mendoza and me will take our usual cut. The time is eight tonight, and see that you get it all straight. I got to fog it back to town before they miss me!"

"Yas suh," the black cook answered quietly. "I'll tell the chief what yo-all said, but I nevah did like that Mendoza man."

Faro Tuttle mounted his horse and rode across the draw and through the pass. Ebony banked his fire and shuffled across the yard toward the log house, and Trigger Dawson crouched behind the rocks and made his way through the brush to the back of the cabin. His thin face was hard as he wriggled forward on his belly to within five yards of the back window, and a moment later he heard the big cook knock on the heavy door.

"Well?"

"It's me, boss. That gamblin' man from th' Palace was jess yere with a message fo' yo-all."

"Come in, Ebony," Bowie called. "What did Faro Tuttle have to say?"

"Dat ole Jew he got in ten thousand dollahs last evenin'," Ebony repeated. "Dis yere Carlos Mendoza says fo' you to send down five men at eight tonight. He say to send this new man, Trigger Dawson with 'em, an' to give him orders to shoot Sher'ff Bowen. Dat Mex he say he will have de sher'ff there after de robbery, an' after de sher'ff is kilt, den he will git Dawson an' make hisself solid to be de next sher'ff. Den he rode right away, boss."

"Might be that's the answer," the big outlaw muttered softly. "I'm afraid of Dawson, and sooner or later I would have to kill him. With Bowen out of the way and Mendoza in office as sheriff, we could keep on the way we've been going."

"No like," a guttural voice interrupted. "Dawson he no fool, an' some say I make for keel Carlos Mendoza!"

"Ease down there, Yaqui," the low voice of Bowie warned. "If ole Bowen stays in office he will ask for Federal help sooner or later. If Mendoza has the stage all set, it's too late to back down now."

"No good," the half-breed insisted. "Last

night I see theengs in th' fire. Thees Mendoza ees bad luck!"

Dawson could hear the big outlaw laugh softly. "I'd go myself if I didn't have this nick in my arm," he answered. "As it is, Yaqui, you go in my place. Take three other men beside Dawson, and keep your eye on him all the way. I hate to lose Dawson in a way, but he won't play the game the way I want it. He's got to go, Yaqui!"

"Me, I no like thees Dawson, but he ees *malo hombre,*" Yaqui muttered. "Hees bad man like you see."

"You, Ebony," Bowie called irritably. "Find Dawson and send him to me."

"Yas suh, boss," the big darky answered softly. "But I got me a feelin' jess like Yaqui has, Mistah Bowie. I don't trust that Mex nor Faro Tuttle neither one, but you de boss man. Yas suh!"

Trigger Dawson wriggled back through the brush and kept behind the rocks as he worked his way up through the draw. He seated himself and leaned back against a boulder with his high-crowned Stetson showing over the top, and then he heard a soft shout as the big cook saw the hat. A moment later Ebony panted up the trail and touched him on the shoulder.

"Mistah Bowie wants to see yo-all in his cabin," he said, and Dawson noticed the worried look on the big darky's face. "He kinda out of humor this mawnin', so walk about easy-like an' talk soft, cowboy."

"Thanks, Ebony," Dawson answered as he stretched his long arms. "I'll git right on up there."

"I kinda likes you," the big cook muttered as he glanced all around. " 'Tain't like me to say nuthin' as a rule, but you watch that Mex Mendoza, cowboy. An' don't say nuthin' lessen you wants to see this darky skun alive!"

"You mean that depity sher'ff what chased me up here?" Dawson answered. "I'll remember what you said, Ebony."

The big cook shook his head as he watched the tall cowboy clatter down the trail on his high heels. Dawson went directly to the log cabin and knocked on the door. Bowie called for him to enter, and Dawson opened the door and stepped inside. Yaqui Yates stood at the window as before while Bowie nodded from a heavy bull-hide chair near the fireplace.

"Mornin', Dawson," he said quietly. "I got a job for you tonight."

Trigger Dawson nodded his head. "What's the layout?" he asked soberly.

"You stopped at Wertheim's store on the way up here," Bowie continued. "Wertheim is the richest man in the country, and he collected ten thousand last night which we intend to relieve him of. You and Yaqui rides down there by eight o'clock with three other men, and you take your orders from Yaqui. You'll get your cut, and after tonight you will be a regular member of the gang."

"I thought I was a member," Dawson answered sulkily. "What does a gent have to do to prove hisself with this outfit?"

"Well, there's several ways," Bowie answered thoughtfully. "But the one sure way is to kill our natural enemies. I'm speaking about the law, Dawson."

"Suits me," Dawson answered carelessly. "It's goin' to give me a lot of pleasure to throw down on Carlos Mendoza."

Bowie frowned and shook his head. "You drew the wrong cards," he said irritably. "I'm dealing this hand, and the ace of spades has been dealt to Sheriff Dave Bowen. He's your target, and see to it that you don't shoot high this time!"

"You're th' boss, but I'd rather line my sights on that Mex," Dawson muttered. "When do we start?"

"Ebony will get you an early supper," Bowie explained. "After that you ride with the other men, and they will be watching you, Dawson."

"That goes double," the tall cowboy answered. "Like you said, chief, I got good eyes myownself."

The half-breed Yaqui watched him with brooding black eyes as he left the cabin and walked to the corral. Dawson fed the roan a double ration of grain and carefully checked his riding gear. He saw Yaqui speak to three men who nodded their heads and began to make ready for the trip. The other members of the gang watched the silent preparations without asking questions, but Dawson knew that the word had been passed around. When they entered the cook shack for an early supper, Ebony placed an extra large steak on his plate.

"Eat hearty, gents," the big cook murmured softly. "I'll be listenin' for dat ole hoot-owl to start squinchin' long about eleben tonight. I'll have uh bait ready fo' yo-all when you comes ridin' back home."

Trigger Dawson glanced at his three companions, all bearded desperadoes with notches on the handles of their six-guns. He knew them only as Pete, Seven-up, and Pecos, but he had learned that they were three of the oldest members of the gang. Yaqui Yates came in and sat down before his plate without a word, and when they had finished eating he jerked his head toward the pole corral.

"We ride," he said briefly. "Dark when we reach Don Ana. Pete an' Pecos come through store the back way. Dawson watches for the shereef while Seven-up an' me make talk to Jew. Make no noise till we have get the dinero!"

The three bearded outlaws nodded and mounted their horses. Yaqui rode stirrup to stirrup with Trigger Dawson, and handed him a black mask with holes cut large for the eyes. Dawson removed his hat and slipped the mask over his hair under his Stetson. Yaqui spoke briefly to the sentry guarding the narrow pass and the five rode out and struck down the trail through the timber. The three men talked in low tones behind him, but the half-breed rode erect in his high saddle and stared straight ahead.

"This Mex," Dawson said softly. "You do not like him, Yaqui."

"Ugh!" Yaqui answered. "Heem I do not trust. He play both sides like side-winder!"

"Reminds me of a rattlesnake too," Dawson agreed. "Back on the trail he swore to kill me someday. He would sell his mother for dinero."

The Indian strain surged to the surface as Yaqui rubbed the handle of his throwing knife with the palm of his hand. His black eyes were beady and bright when he looked searchingly at the tall cowboy, and his voice was a guttural growl when he answered.

"He say he keel Yaqui too. I theenk mebbe not, me. I have see theengs in the fire, but Señor Bowie he weel not listen."

"Did the fire say that Mendoza will be the next sher'ff?" Dawson asked in a whisper.

Yaqui jerked his head and peered at him from slitted eyes. "Fire say he die," he growled throatily. "Fire say many men he die!"

Dawson shrugged carelessly. "A gent can't die but one time," he murmured softly. "You keep yore eye on that Mendoza, Yaqui."

"Now we no talk," the breed answered. "It gets dark, an' soon we shall be near Don Ana. The shereef ees yours, Dawson. Señor Bowie have so order eet!"

Dawson did not answer as the horses picked their way down the steep trail, and he neck-reined when Yaqui jerked his head

to the left. One of the men behind looked at his watch and called softly.

"Ten minutes to eight. Keep in the dark when we hit the town. We can leave the hosses out back when we git to Wertheim's, an' every man knows his job."

DOUBLE CROSS

They walked the horses across the log bridge that spanned the Rio Grande; a narrow muddy stream flowing sluggishly past the edge of town where low adobe shacks gleamed whitely through the night. The back of Wertheim's store was built of sheet metal, and the five outlaws dropped down behind a low shed and fastened their horses with slip-knots for a quick get-away.

Pete and Pecos took their places at the back door and waited while the other three crept along the low building toward the front. An oil lamp threw a yellow light through a side window, and Dawson saw the old Jew behind his wicker cage as they doubled over and crawled beneath the sill.

All three had guns in their hands as they rounded the corner and slid across the porch to the front door. Yaqui stepped in first with Trigger Dawson at his heels. Seven-up crowded Dawson close as the back door opened to admit Pete and Pecos. Old Sol Wertheim glanced up from his books and leaped to his feet when he saw Yaqui and Seven-up facing him with leveled guns.

"Don't shoot! I have no money in the store!"

Trigger Dawson walked across the store and took his stand behind a large case of heavy wood. He could not be seen from the front door, and he smiled mirthlessly as he covered the entrance with the two heavy guns in his hands. Pecos and Pete were coming down the long store from the rear, and Seven-up walked behind the wicker cage while Yaqui covered Wertheim from the front. Seven-up stuck his gun in the old Jew's back and growled through his beard.

"Kick in with that ten thousand. Pronto, Jew, before my finger slips!"

Sol Wertheim raised his skinny arms above his head as the gun pressed against his spine. He looked like an ancient Rabbi with the tight-fitting skull cap of silk covering his thin gray hair; faded blue eyes with shaggy brows above the long curved nose that almost touched his heavy beard. His stooped shoulders trembled under the yellow light as he shrank away from the gun, and Seven-up stepped back as he repeated his demand.

"Where's that ten thousand, Wertheim? Me an' my pards is in uh hurry, so you better dig it up pronto!"

"I send it to Las Cruces this morning," the old Jew quavered in his high-pitched voice. "In the drawer you will find two hundred dollars. Take it, mein friend, but do not shoot a poor old Jew!"

Seven-up smiled grimly and jerked his head toward Yaqui Yates. The half-breed holstered his gun and stepped forward with the throwing knife in his hand; his black eyes glittering under the oil lamp. Sol Wertheim shrank back until his shoulders touched the adobe wall, and Yaqui followed him silently like a great stalking cat.

"Take the money," Wertheim pleaded in a hoarse whisper. "Take anything in the store, but spare me mein life!"

"Ten thousand pesos," Yaqui said quietly. "Or *el cuchillo* weel dreenk your blood!"

The old Jew groaned and held his skinny hands in front of his face. "Not the knife, chentlemens," he pleaded. "Keep him away and I will get the money. *Gott in himmel;* ten thousand dollars!"

Seven-up motioned Yaqui back and grinned under his mask as the old Jew turned his back and pawed an old cardboard box from a shelf. His hand reached into the opening and pulled on a heavy canvas sack, and Seven-up leaped forward to

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jerk the bag from his fingers. All four men leaned forward as the heavy gold clinked when the sack fell to the board shelf where Wertheim displayed his goods. Pecos and Pete crowded up to the cage for a look; froze in their tracks when a cold voice barked behind them.

"Drop yore hardware and touch the ceiling! I'll plug the man that turns around!"

"Trigger Dawson!" Seven-up was the only one of the four facing Dawson, and his eyes were slitted as he breathed the name through his bearded lips. "Drop yore guns, fellers; he's got us covered!"

Pecos and Pete dropped their weapons and raised their arms slowly. Seven-up had laid his forty-five on the shelf to grab the canvas sack, and the half-breed allowed the shining blade to slip through his fingers. The old Jew was smiling through his long beard as he reached out and picked up the heavy gun.

"Tie them fellers up tight, Wertheim," Dawson ordered quietly. "Don't get between them an' me, and if one of them makes uh move he's going to get a little trigger law. Work fast, Wertheim, before we have callers!"

Sol Wertheim lowered his skinny arms with a sigh of relief and reached under the shelf for some buckskin thongs. He moved quickly in spite of his seventy years, and he sighed again when he had finished tying the hands of Yaqui Yates behind the half-breed's back. Seven-up growled a curse when the old Jew poked him in the back savagely with his own gun.

"You can't git away with this, Dawson," he muttered. "The chief will hunt you down no matter where you go!"

Trigger Dawson was the only one of the five who did not wear a mask, and he smiled with his lips when Wertheim finished his task and ripped the masks from the four faces. Wertheim called each in turn by his name, and they glared at him when he kicked the discarded weapons under the counter. The cold flat voice of Trigger Dawson barked across the store from behind the heavy case that hid him.

"Drop that gun, Jew. Drag that money sack over here an' don't git careless."

"But I tink you help me," Wertheim protested shrilly. "You have a kind face, mein friend."

Trigger Dawson grunted. "Never mind th' bouquets," he answered coldly. "Just tell Sher'ff Bowen to watch that Mex depity of his. Yaqui kin tell you that I am right, but that don't help you none. I was to be th' goat in this little stick-up, an' I'm going to get paid for having good ears. Give Faro Tuttle my regards when you see him, Yaqui. I was right behind th' cook-shack when he delivered Mendoza's message to Ebony. Likewise, I was behind that cabin of Bowie's an' heard his instructions."

"Black Beel weel find you," Yaqui promised in a thin whisper. "I should have keeled you that night in the cabin!"

Trigger Dawson holstered one of his guns and grabbed the heavy sack while he motioned Wertheim back against the wall with his right-hand gun. Then he dragged the sack to the back door and disappeared, and Wertheim reached behind to a shelf and brought out another forty-five just as the four outlaws crowded out from behind the cage.

"Stand still, chentlemens," he growled softly, and his wrinkled body was steady as he covered them with the gun. "The law will catch that robber who have taken mein gold."

Seven-up scowled as the sound of pounding hoofs came to them from the rear. "I had that jigger under my sights twice on

th' way down," he growled. "I knew then I should have pressed triggers!"

Trigger Dawson smiled in the dark as he stood in a little closet behind the long store. The bag of gold was under a pile of old boxes in one corner, and he smiled again when he heard the horse pounding across the log bridge at the end of the street.

He had pulled the slip knot of Yaqui's sorrel, knowing that the intelligent animal would go straight back to the hideout when he slapped it on the rump with his hat. The law would never think of looking for him so close to the hold-up, and Trigger Dawson settled himself comfortably as he watched the inside of the store through a long crack in the wall.

The front door opened suddenly as old Dave Bowen leaped inside with six-guns in both hands. Carlos Mendoza followed more slowly, his dark eyes darting around the store to place Trigger Dawson. Both men stopped when they saw the four outlaws against the wall under the steady gun of the old Jew. The Mexican deputy stared as his jaw dropped with surprise, and old Sol Wertheim chuckled loudly.

"Watch Carlos Mendoza, Sheriff Bowen," he shouted in his shrill voice. "I was held up by this gang just a few minutes ago. You will take them to jail, mein friends."

"Where ees that Treeger Dawson?"

Wertheim turned quickly. "How did you know about that one?" he asked quietly.

Mendoza flushed angrily. "He held up that Tulurosa bank, and he join Bowie's gang when I chase heem," he shouted excitedly. "He have escape, shereef!"

"Wait jest uh minute," the old sheriff answered with a puzzled frown. "How come you to know about this hold-up, Mendoza?"

"I have word from a man who do not like thees Treegar Dawson," the Mexican explained quickly. "He swore that he would keel you tonight!"

"Hmmm," the sheriff grunted. "An' you let me come through them doors first. Somethin' funny here!"

"Five men come in while I work on my books," Wertheim explained quietly. "In some way they found out that I had collected ten thousand dollars, and that Indian threatened to cut my throat. After they took the money, this Treeger Dawson held them up with his guns while I tie their hands. Then he cover me and take the money for himself!"

"Well, we got four of them anyway," the sheriff answered with satisfaction. "Ever' one of these long-riders is wanted by th' law."

"Wheech way deed thees Dawson go?" Mendoza shouted.

Seven-up spoke for the first time. "He lit a shuck toward the border before you come in. Ridin' hell fer leather, but some of the boys will git him shore as hell!"

"Some day I keel you, Mex!"

All eyes turned to the half-breed who was staring at Carlos Mendoza with a strange glitter in his black eyes. A deep red spot glowed brightly on the high cheekbones to mark his Yaqui ancestry, and the Mexican shuddered as he made a little jabbing motion with his right-hand gun. Sheriff Bowen knocked the gun down with a blow of his hand.

"Hold that, Mendoza! You shoot uh prisoner when he's all tied up an' a new gent will be wearin' yore star!"

"It was Trigger Dawson who told me to warn you about Carlos," the old Jew interrupted softly. "He was hiding when Faro Tuttle told Bowie about my ten thousand. He said he heard the whole plan!"

Wertheim's shrewd old eyes were watching the Mexican deputy as he spoke, and he smiled when a greenish pallor spread across the swarthy face. Stark terror widened the Mexican's eyes, and his hands trembled when he glanced at the stiff face of Yaqui.

The half-breed was staring at him without a muscle moving in his face, but the

black eyes glittered with savage hatred without blinking. The sheriff looked puzzled; breathed a sigh of relief as the door opened to admit a grizzled old veteran with a shiny star on his worn vest. Jim Towers was the jailer because of the rheumatism that crippled his warped legs

"Glad you come, Jim," Bowen growled. "We got four of Black Bill Bowie's gang for you to guard."

Trigger Dawson slipped out of the shed in the back and jerked the slip-knot as he mounted the tall roan. He rode through the dark alley at a walk; tied the roan again under the over-hanging branches of a pepper tree. Then he slipped through the deeper shadows to a long low adobe building where iron bars marked the windows of the jail. The little town was already asleep, and Trigger Dawson waited by the end window until the tramp of boots warned him of the arrival of the sheriff with his prisoners.

Bowen and Mendoza were flanked out on each side of the four prisoners with the old jailer bringing up the rear with a double-barreled shotgun in his gnarled fists. Mendoza struck a match and lighted the coal-oil lamp in the front office, and the sheriff lined up the prisoners and searched them for concealed weapons. He took a two-shot derringer from the boot of Seven-up; slapped Pecos around the body and found a shoulder gun under the wool shirt. Yaqui Yates gave no sign when the sheriff jerked a raw-hide thong from around his thin neck and found a sheath between the half-breed's shoulder blades.

"Nice li'l playthings," the old jailer grunted. "That Yaqui is th' slickest hand with a throwin' knife in these hills, Dave!"

Sheriff Dave Bowen glanced at the pair of light-handled throwing knives in the buckskin sheath. Then he turned his head to look at Carlos Mendoza who was rubbing the grip of his gun with a shaking hand.

"I'm thinkin' it's a good thing for you that we got Yaqui in jail," he said quietly to the Mexican. "You better stay away from him, Mendoza!"

"He's an outlaw, ain't he?" the deputy growled sulkily. "Didn't I help catch all four of them hombres?"

"You did not," the sheriff answered gruffly. "We caught these fellers jest because thieves fell out among themselves. This Trigger Dawson found out that they were going to job him for the hold-up, and he turned the tables an' took all the loot for himself. Now we got to run him down, and don't forget that Black Bill Bowie is still on the loose."

"I know an hombre up there," the Mexican began eagerly. "He was to let me know the next time Bowie made a trip across the border, and I had a trap all ready for heem. Weeth thees Yaqui een the jail eet weel be easy, Shereef Bowen!"

A dark body flashed across the office of the jail before the sheriff could interfere. The half-breed lashed out with his right boot and kicked the Mexican full in the stomach, and then the old jailer swung the shotgun by the barrel. Yaqui dropped like a stone as the Mexican writhed in agony on the floor, and Sheriff Bowen turned his guns upon the three crouching outlaws along the wall.

"Get back there to them cells," he shouted. "I'll drill th' first hombre that raises a hoof!"

He drove the three prisoners down the little hall and into a cell, locking the door with a bang when Seven-up passed through. Then he reached for a knife and severed the thongs that bound their hands, making the prisoners back up to the bars.

Returning to the office, he reached down and caught the half-breed by the collar and dragged him to a separate cell. He cut the thongs after examining the nasty scalp wound, and returned to the office just as Carlos Mendoza staggered to his feet.

"I keel that Indio! He have insult Carlos Mendoza weeth hees filthy feet!"

Sheriff Bowen walked straight up to the Mexican and pushed the threatening six-gun toward the floor. "Put up that gun, yuh dang fool," he growled. "You got a lot of explaining to do about this three-cornered play tonight. I'm still sheriff of Don Ana County, but it seems to me that ever'body knows more about this hold-up than me."

"You take that ole Jew," the jailer interrupted. "Them fellers usually sweat blood when they lose a lot of dinero, but ole Sol was twinklin' like uh Christmas tree on rush hizzoner when they celebrate their big day."

"Rosh Hosannah," a laughing voice corrected. "You have the prisoners safe, mein friends?"

Sheriff Bowen turned quickly to face the old Jew. "Looky yere, Sol," he began irritably. "What you know about this yere ruckus tonight?"

"I should know," Wertheim shrugged as he rubbed his skinny hands. "I lose me ten thousand dollars, but that Trigger Dawson save me mein life. When I think of that shiny knife . . ."

His shrewd old eyes glanced at the Mexican as he finished in the middle of the sentence. Carlos Mendoza was scowling at him as he held both hands to his groin, and the old Jew smiled coldly as he addressed Sheriff Bowen.

"Election comes soon, mein friend. Now that you have capture these robbers, you are sure to be elected again."

The sheriff grunted. "But first I aim to catch this Trigger Dawson," he growled. "If he gits back to Black Bill, them two together would rob th' county blind."

"I want that you should come back up to the store," Wertheim said quietly, as if he had not heard the sheriff. "There are three horses tied out back in the trees."

"I might have knowed that," the sheriff answered. "The hosses them fellers came down from the hills on. Keep yore eyes on the prisoners, Jim."

The old jailer nodded and patted his sawed-off shotgun. "I'll watch 'em, boss. You takin' Mendoza along?"

"Me, I cannot walk as yet," the Mexican protested quickly. "That Indio keeck me like a mule."

"Don't need him," Bowen growled. "C'mon, Sol."

BLOODY CHALLENGE

In the darkness behind the adobe jail, Trigger Dawson smiled grimly as his left hand slipped down to his boot. He drew a long throwing knife from a sheath pocket and held it in his palm for a moment. Then he flicked his wrist toward the barred window; slid to the side and waited when he heard the knife strike the floor point first. Inside the cell the black eyes of the half-breed darted to that flash of silver and watched the thin blade vibrate in the planking. Two whispered words came to Dawson's ears through the window.

"Gracias, amigo!"

He raised up cautiously and watched while Yaqui changed his position until his back was to the knife. Then a brown hand reached back to palm the blade as voices echoed back from the front office. Old Jim Towers was speaking to Carlos Mendoza.

"Dave might need some help if he runs into that Trigger Dawson," he growled, and there was a note of uneasiness in the old jailer's voice. "Seein' as yo're laid up for a spell, you stay yere an' watch the jail while I lopes over yonder to back the sher'ff up. That dang outlaw might be hidin' around there to make trouble."

The Mexican veiled his dark eyes and tried to appear careless. "I watch," he answered softly. "You lock all the doors good?"

"Dave Bowen locked them doors, so don't you worry none," the old jailer answered. "Dang this rheumatiz in my laigs!"

The Mexican smiled with his lips when Towers limped up the street toward Wertheim's store. Then he turned the lamp low and strolled back to the cells with his hands on the six-guns strapped to his thin legs.

Yaqui glanced up quickly; came to his feet in the center of the little cell with black eyes glittering in the faint light. The other three outlaws were in the back on the opposite side. They could see the half-breed shadowed against the window, but a corner hid the Mexican from them as he hugged the wall and stared at Yaqui Yates.

"So you would keel me," the Mexican sneered silkily. "You have keeck Carlos Mendoza weeth the foot, an' I do not forget, Indio!"

"Ugh," Yaqui grunted. "Unlock the door, *cholo!*"

"I weel unlock the door," the Mexican agreed softly. "Sometimes the doors they are not lock good, an' then the prisoner he try for escape. Carlos Mendoza ees the law, an' of course he have to keel you when you try for escape. After that I unlock the door."

The tall half-breed straightened suddenly in the cell. Now he understood why the Mexican had turned down the light in the front office. Carlos Mendoza would shoot him because of that kick, after which he would unlock the cell door to show that the prisoner had tried to escape. His hands were on his lean hips under the red silk sash, and his low voice was guttural when he answered.

"My people have never liked your people, *cabrone,*" he growled slowly. "When Black Bill hear how you meant to betray heem, he weel keel you."

"But he weel never hear," Mendoza whispered. "That secret dies weeth you, Indio. My people want me to be shereef, an' you know too much."

Trigger Dawson flattened himself against the rough 'dobe wall with six-gun in his right hand. He dared not show himself against the window. He held his breath and waited for the half-breed to answer; smiled in the darkness when the guttural tones sounded closer.

"Your people are peons who work like the cattle," the half-breed sneered. "Because of you we are in the *carcel.* Treeger Dawson hear about how you shoot heem after he keel the shereef. He hear Faro tell *el Negro* who ees call Ebony. For that he take all the dinero for himself!"

The Mexican seemed to lose his composure, and his voice was shrill with fear when he answered. "Treeger Dawson! He know about the plan?"

"He know," the half-breed growled. "I tell Black Beel eet no good, but you have already feenesh the plan. For that you die, *cucaracha,* cockroach. Treeger Dawson ees *malo hombre,* an' he have promise to keel you!"

The heavy voice of Seven-up shouted from the other side. "Who you talkin' to, Yaqui?"

"Mendoza," the half-breed answered more loudly. "He plans to betray Black—"

His voice was drowned as the Mexican shouted loudly. "So! You would try for escape?"

His hands slapped down to the holsters on his thin legs as the half-breed threw himself to the side. Both guns slid across the lips of his cut-away holsters as Yaqui's right hand went back to his shoulder and flashed out to throw the knife between the heavy bars.

The heavy guns exploded deafeningly in the low room, and Yaqui Yates jerked back as the heavy slugs tore into his chest and

shocked him to the floor. He crawled forward while the blood gushed from his wounds; his beady black eyes fixed on the face of the weaving Mexican.

Carlos Mendoza tried to scream as the six-guns slipped from his hands and clattered on the tile floor. The scream was stopped and faded into a gurgling rattle as he tried to bring his hands up to reach the handle of the throwing knife.

The light haft was visible just below his Adam's apple; the thin blade all the way through his throat. The three outlaws in the back cell were shouting and cursing as they rattled the bars, and Carlos Mendoza leaned back against the wall and slid slowly to the floor.

"Cucaracha!"

The half-breed sneered the one word as the feverish light faded from his black eyes. A head showed briefly in the window as slitted blue eyes stared at the two dead men for a long moment. The head drew back again as pounding hoofs rattled down the street, and Sheriff Dave Bowen hit the ground like a relay rider and threw the reins to the ground as his horse bunched his feet and slid to a stop. Old Jim Towers was right behind the sheriff with the shotgun cradled against his hip, and the three outlaws in the tank bellowed with insane rage as they rattled the bars of their cell.

"It's that dang Mex," the sheriff shouted. "Watch them fellers, Jim!"

He leaped through the office door with six-guns ready for a chopping shot in case of a rush. His faded eyes darted from the body of Carlos Mendoza to the sprawling form of Yaqui Yates with a look of understanding. Then he was at the door of the big cell driving the three outlaws back against the wall as he tried the lock. He sighed with relief when he found it fastened; shouted a question at Seven-up while he covered the three with his guns.

"What happened here?"

"That damn Mex come back here an' tole Yaqui he was goin' to kill him for that kick in the belly," Seven-up growled. "That's what we git for trustin' uh startoter like we done!"

Sheriff Bowen leaned over and picked up the Mexican's guns. He examined the shells, reached for his keys and unlocked the half-breed's cell while the old jailer covered the outlaws with his sawed-off. Bowen turned Yaqui Yates over and shuddered when he saw the two wounds in the half-breed's breast. Then he turned, and his eyes widened as he stared at the hilt of the throwing knife in the Mexican's throat.

"They killed each other," he murmured softly. "That Yaqui done threw a knife clear through Mendoza's neck, an' it must have got his brain in the back!"

Seven-up laughed sneeringly. "Yaqui promised to git him," he shouted. "That breed was the fastest hand with uh throwin' knife this side of th' border. You didn't search him good, Bowen!"

"I searched him down to his socks," the sheriff muttered. "You searched him again when he was cold on the floor after you had buffaloed him with yore gun, Jim!"

The old jailer scratched his head. "You can't never tell about them Indians, Dave," he answered doubtfully. "But she's plain as day what happened. Mendoza was in this gang up to his horns, an' he come back yere to murder the breed. Yaqui had promised to kill the Mex, an' Mendoza knew he would do it if he ever got loose. So he snuck back here in the dark an' cut down on him with both guns!"

"You had no call to leave th' jail, Jim," the sheriff growled. "I knew Mendoza was gunning for Yaqui, an' I tole you not to leave the jail. You see what happened?"

The old jailer shrugged. "Good riddance," he said gruffly. "That Mex was out to git yore office, Dave. You heard what ole Sol Wertheim said. Say, Dave! Looky at that window there in the back of that cell. That tell you anything?"

Trigger Dawson slid to the ground and

crawled back in the weeds. His hand found the slip-knot as he mounted the tall roan, and he neck-reined quickly to the right and rounded the corner of the jail as Sheriff Bowen leaped into the cell.

"Somebody throwed that knife to Yaqui through th' window," the sheriff muttered. "You reckon it was Faro Tuttle?"

"Naw," the jailer growled. "Faro lit uh shuck for the hills when we was bringin' these fellers to jail. More like it was some Injun friend of Yaqui's what slipped him that knife."

Sheriff Bowen backed out of the cell and stared at the face of Carlos Mendoza. Then he reached down quickly and grasped the handle of the throwing knife, shuddering as he withdrew the long blade with a jerk. He wiped the gory blade on the Mexican's vest and held the knife to the light from the office.

"T.D." he muttered. "Them initials is carved there in that handle, Jim."

"T.D." the old jailer repeated. "That stands for Trigger Dawson!" he shouted. "Blow in that lamp, Dave!"

Sheriff Bowen shrugged. "Listen," he said quietly. "You hear them hoss-hoofs poundin'?"

"He must have been back there the whole time," Towers whispered hoarsely. "He knew that Mendoza aimed to kill the Injun an' he give Yaqui a sportin' chance. You know that, Dave?"

"I know," the sheriff growled. "He could have killed the both of us if he'd been so minded. We got to git that feller, Jim!"

"Yeah," the old jailer answered. "An' Faro Tuttle has gone to warn Black Bill Bowie, an' we got three desperate killers to guard yere in th' jail. How you goin' to git him, Dave?"

"Posse in th' mornin'," the sheriff growled. "I'll take out after him come daylight, an' you stay here an' guard the prisoners. Better go down an' call Doc Blake to look at these bodies. The way I see it, Yaqui done paid off a debt before he started for the happy hunting ground!"

SIX-GUN EXPLAINING

Faro Tuttle walked his horse slowly up the steep trail leading to the narrow pass where a sentry waited with rifle steadied across a breastwork of rocks. The little gambler threw his head back, and the plaintive cry of the hoot-owl parted his lips in a thin line. The sentry lowered his rifle and answered the call softly. The gambler rode through the pass and whispered a question.

"Black Bill in bed?"

"Yeah. What happened to Yaqui and his bunch?"

"In jail," the gambler snarled. "I got to see Bowie right away!"

The sentry sent the call of the hoot owl ringing across the narrow draw three times. "Git down to the cabin," he told the gambler. "Black Bill will be waiting the time you git there!"

Faro Tuttle spurred his tired horse toward the log hut as a light blazed up from within. Black Bill Bowie was framed in the opening when the door was flung back, and Tuttle swung to the ground and entered the house.

"Well?" The tall outlaw whispered the question.

"All them fellers is in jail except Trigger Dawson," the gambler answered savagely. "He waited until they had the money, and then he threw down on them an' held them under his guns while that old Jew tied them up. After which he takes the ten thousand an' rides toward th' border after telling Yaqui that he was behind yore cabin here when that big cook of yours was giving you my message!"

The big outlaw straightened as a frown of anger passed over his face. "So he knew he was to be the goat after the hold-

up," he whispered. "It's a wonder he didn't kill Mendoza."

"Mendoza helped take them four to jail," the gambler growled. "That old jailer was there to back up Sher'ff Bowen, and the Mex couldn't make a move. I grabbed a hoss an' burnt the wind to give you the low-down."

Black Bill Bowie tied his string necktie and shifted the heavy guns on his legs. Then he walked to the door as a group of men came from the deeper shadows beyond the cook-shack, and his voice was harsh and domineering when a torrent of words ripped from his lips.

"Yaqui and the boys are held in jail down in Don Ana," he began. "There's five of you left, and I want you to saddle your best horses and ride. You ought to get there by day-break, and you know what to do. Surround that damn 'dobe jail and turn our men loose. The chances are that Mendoza will help from the inside."

"You ridin' with us, chief?" a tall outlaw asked from the shadows.

Bowie's fists clenched before he answered. "I'm riding after you," he snapped viciously. "Trigger Dawson turned traitor and held the boys up while that old Jew tied them under Dawson's guns. Then Dawson took that ten thousand and lit uh shuck toward the border. He's my meat if I have to track him clear through Mexico!"

The five men nodded and hurried away to saddle their horses. Faro Tuttle glanced at the big outlaw and hurried after the other men. He changed saddles to a fresh horse and rode through the pass with them just as Ebony took his position behind the rocky barricade to guard the hide-out. The men talked among themselves as the sure-footed horses picked their way down the steep trail, and the little gambler called a warning when they crossed the river at the edge of Old-town.

"Better fold yore jaws unless you want the whole town to know we're ridin' in. We might have a chance if we can surprise old Jim Towers. Chances are Sheriff Bowen will be in bed!"

The high mountain air was still with that quiet which comes just before the dawn. The six men rode silently behind the buildings which lined the one winding street, and Faro Tuttle raised his hand in signal and reined in behind a shed at the rear of the Palace saloon.

Rifles were taken from saddle-scabbards as the gambler whispered his plans, and two men left the group and skirted several buildings before crossing the street to come up behind the adobe jail. The other four crept to the street and took positions behind store fronts where they waited for their companions to reach the rear of the jail.

The thin call of the hoot-owl floated softly on the still air from behind the jail, and Faro Tuttle nudged the tall outlaw at his side and drew his guns. Like wolves skulking through the shadows, the two men slipped silently across the street toward the office of the jail. A hoarse voice stopped them in the middle of the dusty street as the old jailer called a warning.

"Stop where you are, gents! Drop them guns before I scatter you all over the street!"

Faro Tuttle triggered his guns while his tall companion raised his rifle and fired through the heavy door. A curtain of flame blasted out from the one front window as the old jailer pressed both triggers of his shotgun loaded with buckshot.

The two men in the street jerked back and bounced in the dust as the heavy charges swept them to the ground, and a rifle roared inside the jail as the two outlaws across the street opened fire from behind the store fronts. The voice of Sheriff Bowen shouted from the cell room where Yaqui Yates was stretched out on the narrow bunk.

"Got one, Jim. Hold them wolves off till daylight shows!"

The old jailer jerked back as a slug caught him high in the shoulder. He sank to the floor and fumbled for his guns as a curtain of darkness slipped down over his senses, and his voice was a trailing whisper that was drowned out by the roar of guns behind the jail.

Two tall figures detached themselves from the shadows across the street and rushed the office door while the sheriff emptied his six-guns through the cell window. His fingers fumbled for fresh shells as he half-turned at the sound of footsteps, and a heavy gun rose and fell with a thud.

Sheriff Bowen turned his head and took the blow on his right shoulder and went down to his knees. Two outlaws were covering him when he tried to struggle to his feet, and the empty guns slipped from his fingers and thudded to the floor.

"Git his keys, Sim. Wait uh minute! Who's that stretched out on that bunk?"

"It's Yaqui," the second outlaw growled. "You kilt him, Bowen, an' you better say yore prayers. You're goin' to git it!"

"Wrong again, Jake," a quiet voice interrupted. "Drop them guns before you turn around. Yo're covered!"

The two outlaws stiffened and loosened their fingers. A third figure leaped through the front door shooting as he came, and Trigger Dawson chopped a shot from his right-hand gun without moving. The third outlaw dropped across the sill with a grunt as the six-guns pitched out ahead of his hands, and Trigger Dawson reached down to the belt of the old jailer and took the handcuffs dangling from a ring.

"Hands behind you," he growled. "Both of you!"

The two outlaws obeyed with muttered curses, and Trigger Dawson fastened them wrist to wrist. He turned in time to see the old sheriff reaching along the floor for one of the guns the outlaws had dropped, and his voice was crisp with warning.

"Stand hitched, sher'ff. You better git up an' lock these jiggers where they will be safe. I don't want to kill you!"

Sheriff Bowen climbed unsteadily to his feet and walked out of the cell. He threw back a door near where the three other outlaws were shouting, and Trigger Dawson prodded Sim and Jake forward with the muzzles of his guns. The sheriff shut and locked the door; followed Dawson to the office as the tall cowboy backed through the arch. He turned quickly when the front door opened; smiled through the smoke at old Sol Wertheim. Sheriff Bowen was crouching for a spring, and he sighed with disappointment and relaxed against the wall when he noticed the old merchant's empty hands.

"You could have covered him easy, Sol," he growled with disgust. "We got about all that gang except Bowie and this one."

The old Jew chuckled in his beard. "I should tell you, Sheriff Bowen," and his nasal voice held a hint of laughter. "I want that you should meet my friend Trigger Dawson. He is the United States deputy marshal I sent for over by Santa Fe yet!"

Sheriff Bowen's jaw sagged as he stared at the tall cowboy. Trigger Dawson holstered his guns; stepped forward and held out his right hand which the sheriff grasped automatically.

"I might have knowed it," he whispered at last. "When you held them fellers in Wertheim's store while he tied them up. But why in tarnation didn't you make yoreself known?"

Dawson pointed to the body of the Mexican deputy on the floor. "That's why," he

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Trigger Law Is Made With The Fastest Gun And Written In Killer's Blood

answered quietly. "We knew there was a leak somewhere in your office, and Carlos Mendoza was a part of Black Bill Bowie's gang."

"But Sher'ff Bradley," Bowen muttered. "Him an' his posse run you right into my arms, an' then you took his hoss."

The deputy marshal grinned. "Took my own hoss," he explained. "Both you and Sheriff Bradley have been trying to catch the Bowie gang, and I stopped over there an' had a talk with him. He took my hoss while I took his, an' we arranged for his posse to run me out of the county. I slipped through your men when I had that ruckus with Mendoza, and th' Mexican came near catching me while I was talking with old Sol in his store."

"You mean you an' Wertheim had this thing all figgered?" Sheriff Bowen demanded.

"I had to get in Black Bill's gang," Dawson explained. "When Mendoza and your posse ran me up in the hills, two of Bowie's gang threw down on me and took me to Bowie. While I was up there I found out that Mendoza was planning to have you killed so he could be sheriff."

The sheriff pulled open a drawer in his desk and handed Dawson a knife. "Here's yore *cuchillo* what you lent Yaqui," he said dryly. "He threw it all the way through Mendoza's neck just about the same time the Mex murdered him."

Dawson took the knife and stuck it down in his boot. "Yaqui had to go," he answered quietly. "I couldn't figger a way to save him, so the best I could do was give him a fighting chance. You see, Sheriff; I had a job to do that was more important."

"You mean catching these other long riders what rode down to turn their pards loose," Bowen said quickly. "I'm thankin' you for that, depity!"

Trigger Dawson shook his head slowly. "That wasn't it," he contradicted. "Black Bill killed uh pard of mine, an' I taken up for him."

Both the sheriff and Sol Wertheim stared at him as they tried to puzzle out his remarks. "I did not know you had any friends over here," Wertheim finally said.

"His name was Cole Manning," and Dawson spoke softly. "He was a Federal man working under cover, and he joined Bowie's gang three months ago to get evidence. I think Bowie found out about Manning, and he killed him in a gun fight. I promised Cole to get Bowie, and I aim to do it!"

"We'll get up uh posse," Sheriff Bowen broke in eagerly. "He's the last of the gang, Dawson!"

Trigger Dawson shook his head slowly. "That's no good," he answered. "The only law Black Bill Bowie knows is trigger law, and I promised to meet him some day to decide who was the fastest gun."

"We'll lay uh trap for him jest the same," Sheriff Bowen insisted stubbornly. "You ain't uh gun-fighter, Dawson. Yo're paid to carry the law!"

"An' I carried it," Dawson answered quietly. "Bowie don't never ask for an advantage, and he don't take none. Unless I miss my guess that big hombre will come ridin' down th' trail looking for me. He don't know I'm ridin' with the law instead of again' it like he does, and I done passed my word. Now you better be lookin' after that old jailer of yores. He's comin' around!"

"I'll send the doctor down," Wertheim volunteered. "Now I go to breakfast with mein friend, and we will see you some more, Sheriff."

"Wait up uh spell," the sheriff shouted. "I can't leave this jail until I git some help; not with all these prisoners to look after."

"I'll come back and give you a hand

after breakfast," Dawson called back. "Last time I ate was yesterday afternoon. C'mon, Sol!"

TRIGGER LAW

Old Sol Wertheim and Trigger Dawson made a strange contrast as they walked down the narrow dusty street of Don Ana in the early sunlight. The tall cowboy in gray woolen shirt, black batwing chaps, and high-heeled, hand-stitched boots. The old Jew in his silk coat and tight-fitting skull-cap, with long gray beard reaching half-way to his waist. For some reason the early-rising citizens sensed an understanding between the two as they walked toward the long adobe store and passed through the broad front doors.

Trigger Dawson continued to the rear and reached behind a pile of discarded boxes. He dragged out the heavy sack of gold; watched the doors while Wertheim placed the sack in his old safe and twirled the dial. Then the tall deputy marshal sat down behind the counter and cleaned his guns carefully, one at a time. Two guns broken down at the same time had proven fatal to several gunmen of his acquaintance, and Trigger Dawson took no foolish chances.

Sol Wertheim watched the careful cleaning of the heavy forty-fives while his thin fingers combed the long gray beard. Several times the old Jew glanced up the street toward the Palace saloon and remarked about the number of men in town at such an early hour.

"There are many Yaquis from the south," he said thoughtfully. "And many Mexicans from Las Cruces way. Always have the Yaquis fought the Mexicans, and both sides have heard about the fight inside the jail. You think he will come, mein friend?"

"Nothing could keep Black Bill Bowie from coming this morning," Dawson answered positively. "Faro Tuttle rode back to the hide-out last night and made his report. We know that because he rode back with Bowie's men and tried to pull a jail break. What does that tell you, Sol?"

The old Jew nodded his head in agreement. "It means that Bowie has heard how you prevented the robbery here and captured his four men," he answered quietly. "His gang is broken up, and all that is left is his pride. As you say, mein friend, he will come soon."

Trigger Dawson thumbed fresh shells through the loading gates and carefully tested the balances of the long barreled guns. Then he wiped every trace of oil away with a clean rag and holstered the weapons, after which he walked to the back room and washed his hands. When he returned to the box behind the long counter, he spoke in a low voice to Wertheim.

"Get busy and check up some stock, Sol. Act like nothing unusual is up, and keep yore hands in plain sight. Two horses just turned in under the pepper trees out back."

"You mean they come here? And why should there be two?"

"Bowie only has one man left," Dawson answered in a whisper. "Big colored cook by the name of Ebony. Bowie is riding that big bay of his."

"But the saloon," Wertheim argued. "I was expecting that he would go there!"

"Bowie has brains, and he has this thing all figured out," Dawson explained. "He never takes an advantage, and he don't ask for any. Ready now; I'll stay out of sight for a while!"

Old Sol Wertheim busied himself with the stock on his shelves on the opposite side of the room. A black head appeared in the back entrance; studied the store carefully before stepping through the door. The old Jew turned slowly when a soft voice addressed him.

"Mornin', Mistah Wertheim. How come yo-all alone in this yere big store?"

"It is early, mein friend," Wertheim answered quietly. "What brings you down

here to Don Ana, Ebony? Most a year since I see you."

"You a smart man, Mistah Wertheim," he began slowly. "Mistah Bowie, he know that you is the big man in de county, an' de death cyard he am out agin. Dat ole ace of spades, boss, an' Trigger Dawson done promised him uh chanct when his arm heal up."

"Bowie robbed me three times," Wertheim answered soberly. "He had a man in the sheriff's office, and the law here was helpless. Now Black Bill Bowie's gang is broken up for good, and you tell me the death card is out. What do you mean, mein friend?"

"Mistah Bowie he go away, suh," the negro answered softly. "But before he go he want to see Mistah Triggah Dawson. It's showdown, suh!"

"Maybe he got to Mexico, this Dawson," Wertheim suggested with his back to Ebony.

"No suh," Ebony contradicted. "We done read his sign jest as plain. Dat Yaqui he kill de Mex with a knife Triggah Dawson throw through de window. Den dat Dawson man he fool de men what rode in to bust up de jail house. After dat he come back yere, an' he hain't left yet."

Trigger Dawson rose up behind the counter and shouldered into a case where he could not be seen from the back door.

"Howdy, Ebony. Yore boss has got mighty good eyes and ears. He come to town with you?"

"Gives yo-all good mawnin', Mistah Dawson," the negro answered. "Mistah Bowie he come down fo' to see who was de fastest gun like you said, suh. Jest you an' him with no favohs asked or given, suh. An' fust off he would like uh few words with yo-all."

"Fair enough, an' I've been waitin' for him," Dawson answered quietly. "I left the sign plain enough for him to read, an' I saw you an' him ride under the pepper trees out back. Tell him to come in, Ebony."

"Yas suh; I'll tell him right off!"

"A minute, Ebony! I overheard the conversation!"

The big negro stopped when Bowie walked through the rear door while he was speaking. The big outlaw was immaculately clad in his usual black broadcloth with string tie neatly knotted, and his handmade boots were shiny and spotless. His black Stetson was settled firmly on the back of his head, and he nodded carelessly at Wertheim. Trigger Dawson stepped out from behind the cupboard and walked through the narrow aisle between the counters.

"Howdy, Dawson," Bowie said calmly. "We meet again."

"Howdy, Bowie. Yore arm git alright?"

The big outlaw shrugged carelessly. "Just a scratch, and it was my left arm," he answered in his low cultured voice. "I knew you wouldn't take an edge," Dawson."

"I knew the same about you," Dawson answered soberly. "You was trying hard to remember back there in the hide-out," he continued. "You have any luck?"

"Four years ago in Las Vegas," the big outlaw said musingly, "I had a little argument with a cowboy out of his teens. In a card game it was, and I had to shoot this yearling's boss when I figured he had cheated. This young cowboy went for his guns, but I had him covered that time. Good thing too, or I would have had to kill him."

"Interestin'," Trigger Dawson murmured. "What was this yearlin's name?"

"Traeger Dotson," the big outlaw answered quietly. "That sounds a lot like Trigger Dawson, don't you think?"

"That's right," Dawson answered soberly. "But Dade Carl never cheated in his life, Bowie. Dade was a U. S. Marshal at the time, an' I was jest breakin' in. I've been huntin' you ever since, an' I

swore to take up where Dade left off. He was trying to break up yore gang then."

The big outlaw shrugged. "It's a short life and a merry one," he answered carelessly. "You did what you set out to do, Dawson. It didn't come to me until last night that you were a deputy U.S. Marshal. You remember our little difference of opinion the day you buried Cole Manning?"

Trigger Dawson nodded, and his blue eyes were bleak as he stared into Bowie's face. "I remember," he answered slowly. "You said you was the fastest gun. Cole Manning was a pard of mine, an' I taken up for him."

"He had a fair chance," Bowie said stubbornly. "Rules are rules, and I did what I had to do."

"As a Federal officer, I'm telling you that you are under arrest," Trigger Dawson answered without hesitation. "An' I'm askin' you to surrender in th' name of the law!"

Black Bill Bowie smiled briefly. "Rules are rules," he answered. "That's part of your code in the presence of witnesses. I'm still the fastest gun. You ready?"

Trigger Dawson sighed. "Looks like yo're set on having Trigger law," he answered quietly. "I'm sayin' . . . *when!*"

As that last whirring word left the lips of Trigger Dawson, the right hand of Black Bill Bowie slapped leather with a speed impossible to follow with the eye.

Trigger Dawson rippled the muscles of his shoulder forward in a sudden twitch that plunged his right hand down to the worn cedar handle like the downward plunge of an eagle making a strike. His thumb dogged the hammer back as his wrist swiveled on the arc to reverse his speed and complete his draw. The long barrel flashed across the lip of his scabbard like glinting light; exploded on the tilt when yellow flame belched against his hip to bounce the heavy gun in his hand.

Another ripping flash echoed the sullen thunder of his gun with scarcely a space of time between the two shots to give them punctuation. Just that flicker of speed which makes the difference between life and death when the issue hinges upon the trigger law of old Judge Colt. Trigger Dawson equalized the recoil with steely wrist as Black Bill Bowie jerked back and swung to the left, and his bullet tore a hole in the floor six inches from the deputy marshal's left boot.

Trigger Dawson was crouching over the smoking gun in his hand with hammer thumbed back for another shot and finger tightening on the hair trigger. The tall outlaw tried to swing around while his gunbarrel pointed at the floor.

Dawson watched through slitted eyes as he gauged each terrible movement of that indomitable will; straightened with a sigh when Bowie's knees buckled suddenly to pitch the big outlaw forward on his face. He turned his head and closed his eyes when the polished boots rattled spasmodically against the planking; sheathed his gun when the long legs became still.

The giant black was staring at the fallen man. "Black Bill Bowie daid," he whispered incredulously. "Jest like I seen in de fire, but he wouldn't lissen. Claimed he war the fastest gun, an' say he would prove it by triggah law!"

Trigger Dawson walked up to the negro and faced him squarely. "You never rode with the wild bunch, Ebony," he said quietly. "But like Bowie said: rules is rules, an' yore due to draw uh short stretch. I'm takin' you in, but before we go I want to ask you uh question."

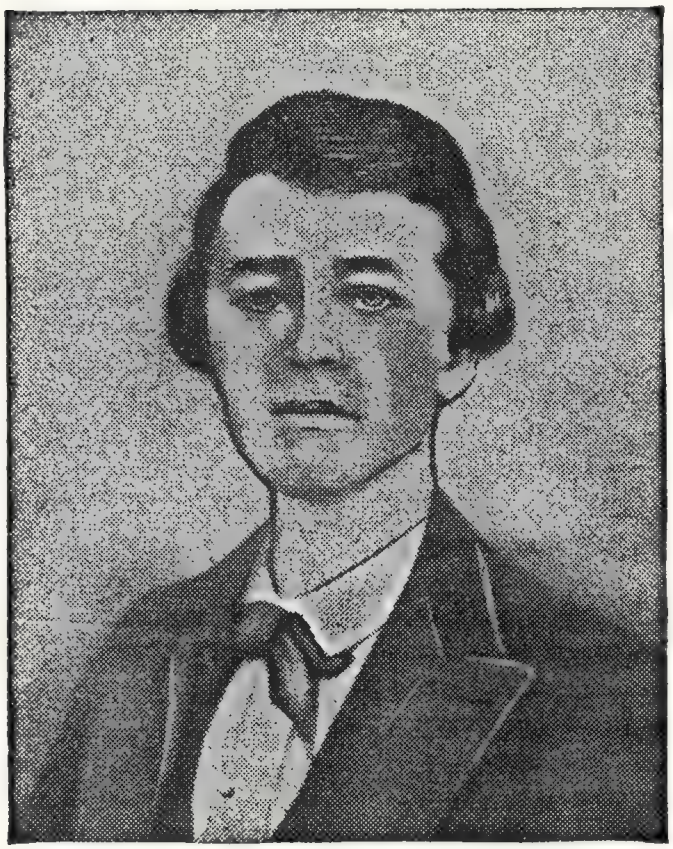
"Yas suh, Mistah Triggah," the darky muttered dazedly. "What yo-all want to know, boss?"

"Did Black Bill get a fair shake?"

"I'll tell uh man," the big cook answered earnestly. "He ain't kickin' none, Triggah Dawson. He knew the ace of spades was out, but he figgered it had yo-alls name on it. He called it de same as yo-all did, Mistah Dawson. Yas suh. Trigger law!"

QUANTRELL, THE GUERRILLA

GUN-TEACHER OF JESSE JAMES



MAN KILLER FOR THE SPORT OF IT

William Clarke Quantrell as he looked at the height of his career of plundering and slaughter.

TRUE FEATURE

By FRANKLIN REYNOLDS

Photographs from N. H. Rose Collection

People have different opinions about who he was. All agree on what he was! William Clarke Quantrell was the first of modern *banditos*. For more than fifty years thousands of lesser lights have tried to follow the trail he blazed. He is the man who taught Jesse and Frank James how to rob trains and take what they wanted.

It was Quantrell who showed the Youngers the gentle art of sticking up banks. Gun-fighters from his band roamed over the West following the Civil War and the fact that these gunmen had been salty enough to ride with Quantrell the Guerrilla was of itself enough to instill terror in the hearts of all they approached.

Quantrell was more of a killer than a

wizard with a gun. He was efficient at the game, so efficient in fact, that a total tally of his victims had not been computed at the time of his death and has only been guessed at since. His idea was to kill as many of his enemies as possible. To remove them from all things mortal with as little effort and expense as possible and to take, steal and carry away everything that he found movable.

The story of his early life is confusing. He lied about it himself whenever such a yarn struck his fancy. Rumor has it that he was born in Hagerstown, Maryland, on July 20, 1836. Before he was sixteen he had been branded as incorrigible by the good citizens and when threatened with a public whipping ran away from home.

Months later he showed up in Cleveland at the home of an uncle. Here he got a job clerking in a grocery store and about the time he was bringing an undue amount of notoriety to his kinsman's family his older brother, a resident of Kansas, sent for the young renegade to accompany him to California in the train of the Gold Rush of '49.

Other historians trace his beginning to a little town in Ohio. "I know he was born in Canal Dover," remarked an old man. "I remember him as a small boy. He delighted in catching frogs and snakes alive. He would nail them to trees to watch them wiggle."

This same group of historians assures us that he had an uncle who was hanged for horse stealing; that his father was imprisoned for burning a church; and that another uncle escaped into Missouri not far ahead of a mob bent on lynching him for the murder of an old man and woman.

Quantrell himself was found one day with a dead man at his feet and a bloody knife in his hand. The fact that he was going to California was a matter of emergency!

It was a torrid day on the Kansas prairies. The withering blasts blew like torches against the two covered wagons traversing the dim trail.

Yelling and riding like demons they came! Thirty-two Kansas Jayhawkers, anti-slavery agitators, were sweeping down on the two wagons. They started shooting. The driver of the first wagon fell to the ground with three holes in his head and two in his heart. This was Quantrell's brother.

The driver of the second wagon, William Clarke Quantrell himself, was trying to pacify an excited team. Suddenly he stood erect, swayed with the expression of pain that crossed his face and fell. By a miracle he avoided being crushed by the heavy wheels of the wagon and rolled to the side of the road.

An old negro had managed to scramble from the back of the wagon bed and ran to the man who still lived in spite of a head so bloody it gave every indication of death.

"Mistuh Quantrell is yo' dead? Lawd he's dead!" the old negro groaned.

Quantrell was almost dead. He afterward said that he was suffering so he wished he could die and was afraid that he wouldn't. A rifle ball had passed through his left shoulder. A large soft slug of lead had smashed one leg. A third had ripped a considerable strip of scalp from his head. Bleeding profusely he felt himself growing weaker. The sun was getting hotter, was burning his eyes from his head.

A few minutes later he was awakened with a boot toe roughly cracking against his ribs. A snarling, bearded face was looking down upon him.

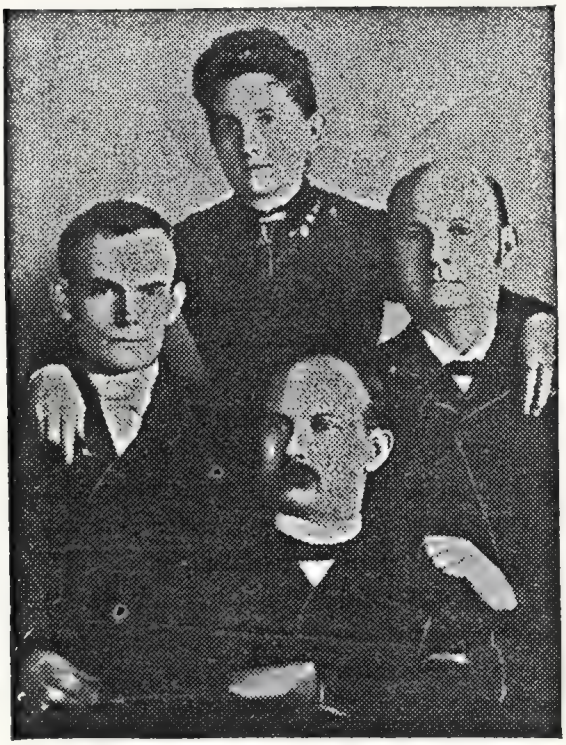
"Yeah! You lousy ———," his tormentor said, "we'll just leave you here. The buzzards and wolves'll be along directly. Then you'll have plenty of your kind with you!" The man laughed. This man was one Williams. He and Quantrell were to meet later in life.

"My brother?" Quantrell enquired.

"He's hell-bound now," the man an-

swered. "Nothing'll bother him and if it does he'll not know it."

The man laughed again. "Owned a nigger did you? Well, he's a free nigger now and a damn sight freer than you because by night you'll be chopping wood in hell!"



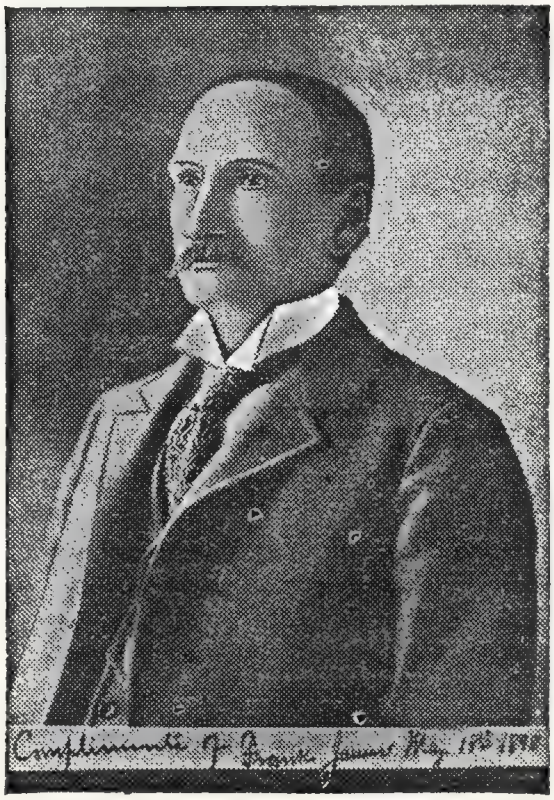
Bob, Jim, and Cole Younger with their sister, Henrietta. Quantrell made them experts at bank-robbing. Cole led his brothers in the famous raid on the Northfield, Minnesota bank.

Again oblivion. Quantrell was tough. He struggled to keep consciousness alive. He looked the ground over. The attackers had taken the wagons and teams. One was stealing the contents of his brother's pockets. He felt for his own personal belongings and found them gone. He was to be left with the body of his brother, without food, without water, to face wolves and buzzards. It was everything but a pleasant situation.

When he next stirred it was considerably later in the day. For two days he suffered on that trail. About fifty steps from it was a small, sluggish stream of warm water. He would roll to it for a drink and then back into the trail again.

Two days and nights of hell, of retrospects, of anguish, and no doubt, of plans for the future. The body of the brother lay rotting in the sun. Buzzards fought the young Quantrell for the possession of it. The wolves didn't care much to distinguish between the living and the dead. The rising of the night wind brought long, low howls and the shuffling of creeping feet. With dawn came the fluttering of wings—the buzzards again. He did not sleep. He could not walk. He had staunched the flow of blood with rank prairie grass. He fought off delirium as hard as he fought wolves and buzzards.

On the morning of the third day an old Indian, Go-lightly Spi-buck, by name, came down the trail. He dug a grave. He



Frank James, brother of the famous Jesse. It was Frank who persuaded Quantrell to allow Jesse to join the outlaw band when Quantrell objected that Jesse, 17, was too young.

looked carefully from one to the other. So near dead was the other, he wanted to be sure the grave received the one it was intended for. Earth fell and over the disturbed ground he built a cairn of stones and dirt.

Quantrell turned his face heaven-ward and swore a mighty oath. What that oath was all can guess but none may know. Quantrell never disclosed the secret and an old-timer once said:

"I filled Go-Lightly Spi-Buck with all the fire-water he could hold twenty times and tried to get him to tell and he wouldn't."

The old Indian figured that where there's life there's hope and he almost rewrote the history of Missouri and Kansas by taking Quantrell home with him and saving his life.

It was a matter of months before Quantrell was himself again. Near the Indian village was a white settlement. Quantrell was ambitious and resourceful. He organized a school, posed as a Baptist preacher and got enough money together to buy himself some clothes, a pair of pistols, a horse and saddle.

Seriously, William Clarke Quantrell was a product of fate. For him fate rode in the guise of a Kansas Jayhawker's personality. It was a cold, cruel, bitter fate. It made him even colder, crueler and the bitterness with which he faced life was extreme.

One-half of the country came to look upon him as something in the nature of a cross between a rattlesnake and a wolf with the instincts of a grave robber. The other half thought of him as a Southern gentleman enamored of his native South and more than willing to fight its battles in the Civil War. Some thought him just a little lower than the angels. But history cannot hesitate over him.

The facts show for themselves. He was the voice and beacon of the Guerrillas. From his sprang all the other outlaw bands that terrorized the country-side during and after the Civil War. Cole Younger, James Younger, Jesse James, Frank James, hundreds of others, all in fact, who afterward became enterprising gun-fighters who had killed their first man on the old Missouri-Kansas line. Quantrell was the man who recruited, incited and encouraged these others. It was Quantrell who insisted that they kill without provocation if necessary.

He schooled them in the tricks of gun-fighting, knife-fighting, plundering, robbery and revenge. Quantrell it was who pomaded his hair, shined boots, perfumed his clothes and put a flower upon his lapel when he went forth to slay and slaughter and glory in the gore of it all.

On August 15, 1857, just about a year after the murder of his brother he rode into Leavenworth, a town belonging to the Jayhawkers, and became known as Charley Hart. He promptly affiliated himself with the Jayhawkers and their anti-slavery organizations and met many of the men who had been with the party that killed his brother on the trail.

He spoke with great respect for John Brown and, apparently, his hatred for the South was increasing daily. He told of negroes he had helped steal from the South and take into the North and of slave owners in the South that he had killed in personal combat.

He was confidential.

The Jayhawkers started to confide in him. Drunk and sober they disclosed the stories of their depredations. They held him in high esteem and told him of the two covered wagons they had attacked some time before. Keeping his peace with these men he went with them and enlisted in a regiment camped at Lawrence under the command of Colonel James Lane.

In a little while he was Sergeant Charles Hart. The day of his promotion he was given command of a patrol of two men. One was the Williams who had sneered at

him on the trail, the other was a man named Hoffman. They had ridden along for some miles when Williams said:

"Hart, I've been wondering about you since you joined up. Your face is familiar. I've seen you somewhere."

"You're right! You have!" Quantrell told him. Then he told him where and when. When the smoke cleared away both Williams and Hoffman were dead and Quantrell was riding toward camp.

In the presence of the commanding officer he reported the ambush of the patrol and told a wonderful story of his escape.

Poor unsuspecting Colonel Lane sent out a detail to bring in the bodies and sent out another patrol to apprehend the killers. In charge of this patrol was—Sergeant Charles Hart!

In true Quantrell fashion this patrol of six men was ambushed and again only the Sergeant escaped. He was daring. No doubting that.

Other patrols under Sergeant Hart were ambushed. Sometimes he showed bullet holes through his clothes or hat, or a ridge cut by lead across his body—but never was he seriously wounded.

In short order he had terrified the entire regiment. Sentinels would be found at their posts sliced to ribbons with Bowie knives or chopped into unrecognizable masses by a good strong arm wielding an ax. Some had been shot. Officers and enlisted men alike were his victims.

Frequently he organized and led patrols hunting the murderers. He was implicitly trusted, far above suspicion and in recognition of his tireless services in hunting the phantom killers was rewarded with a commission as lieutenant!

These killings were strung out over a period of four or five years. It is estimated that over this period he killed more than a hundred men. Included in this number were twenty-nine of the party who had killed his brother. Shortly before his death he confided to Jesse James that he had located the other three in California and planned to go there and get them.

In May, 1861, he deserted the Union Army and enlisted in Stewart's Cavalry Company of the Confederate States Army.

In the battle of Lexington, Missouri, he was by all odds the most dashing figure on the field. He was mounted on a good horse, armed with a Sharp's rifle and four Remington pistols. Wearing a vivid scarlet shirt he had stuck a long black plume in his hat. Riding directly up to the enemy's lines he shot an officer through the head and escaped.

Late in 1861 the idea occurred to him that he would be better off fighting for himself. Accordingly he deserted the Confederate States Army and set about organizing a renegade army of his own to fight against both sides, to steal, pillage, burn and murder.

At first his group was composed of but eight men. A little group of killers who knew nothing of war and cared nothing for principle. But they did know how to fight and how to shoot. They were all gunmen of the first water. As a starter this little force routed and demoralized an entire company of General Burris' regiment stationed in Jackson county. The outlaws killed more than twenty soldiers and confiscated what they needed in the way of horses and equipment.

John Searcy lived in Jackson county. He claimed to be a Southern sympathizer but was suspected as a horse thief. Quantrell searched his farm, found the stolen horses and had Searcy hanged. Searcy remained hanging for several days, a grim reminder that Quantrell was the "law."

The horses! Quantrell kept them!

The band of eight grew to a troop of forty. Into it had come Todd, Cole Younger and Frank James. Younger, when he enlisted, still had about his neck the

purple furrow plowed by a rope the night the Jayhawkers had shot down his old father and strung him up to a tree.

Rewards totaling many thousands of dollars were offered for Quantrell. The posters emphasized the fact that the rewards would be paid as quickly for him dead as for him living.

On October 22, 1862, he was encamped in Cass county when a stranger rode into camp seeking to join his band. The newcomer so aroused the suspicions of the men that they took him before their commander.

Quantrell recognized him as Jesse Williams, a brother of the man he had killed on the first patrol out of Lawrence. Williams admitted frankly that he had come into camp to kill Quantrell and thereby avenge his brother's death. The next morning when Quantrell moved camp Williams remained behind. He was hanging cold and dead from the tree nearest the site of Quantrell's camp fire.

So it was that Quantrell continued to harass the enemy. He was a breathing, living, aggressive reality—riding through the midnight, laying ambuscades by lonesome road-sides, ambushing marching columns, robbing banks and trains, killing, burning! He was at war when the troops were snug in their barracks.

Dawned the fateful year 1863. Over in Clay county was a peace-loving old soul, the venerable Doctor Reuben Samuels, step-father of Jesse and Frank James. He was cruelly murdered because Frank was riding with Quantrell. Jesse's mother and sister were incarcerated in a filthy prison in Saint Joseph. Jesse was whipped within an inch of his life, escaped in the dark and went into hiding in a cave that he and his outlaw band afterwards used many times.

One day Frank James looked up to see Jesse approaching the Guerrilla camp.

Quantrell looked the seventeen-year-old boy over.

"You're pretty young," he protested, "I doubt if I can use you."

"If you can't," Jesse answered him, "I'll organize a band of my own and yours will look like a Sunday school class beside it."

"You ought to see him shoot," Frank James interpleaded.

"Well," said Quantrell, "if when riding a horse at full gallop you can hit five fence posts out of ten shots at forty yards you're hired."

"Give me a horse," was the simple request.

With his ten shots he hit ten fence posts!

With the passing months Quantrell raided down into Arkansas, across into Tennessee and up into Kentucky. In Danville, Kentucky, he was captured in a saloon by some Union soldiers. Jesse James dashed to his rescue, killed the captors and freed his beloved commander.

On June 11, 1865, in Nelson county, Kentucky, Quantrell's troopers were resting in a barn during a rain storm. Here they were surprised by two hundred Federal Cavalrymen. Quantrell ordered his men to flee, and thinking he was going with them, they obeyed his order. Two of them, however, saw him trapped and elected to stay and die with him.

After coming to Kentucky he discarded the regular cavalry mounts he had been using and raided a stock farm, stealing twenty thoroughbreds valued at more than one hundred thousand dollars. These were nervous, high-strung, emotional animals. Quantrell was riding a fine stallion that he had taken into the barn to feed. He had removed the saddle and bridle for the animal's comfort. There was not time for him to saddle and ride away with his men. He made them shoot him to pieces.

In a Catholic hospital in Louisville he died a few days later.

Quantrell left a will and an estate of four or five thousand dollars. This, he directed on his death bed, should be divided between the hospital and a woman who was running

A $10,000 Bullet Killed Jesse James, Six-Gun Disciple Of Quantrell

(Below) Bob Ford, who shot Jesse James for the $10,000 reward. (Above) Jesse James. Photograph taken after his death. Note the beard he grew for disguise.

a house in the Red Light district of Saint Louis! It was said the woman was his sister.

His will was done!

The James boys had ridden away to organize their own band of bank and train robbers. They were to make life miserable for the Pinkerton Detectives, sheriffs and railroad police over the territory in which they operated. It was at the age of thirty-four in Saint Joseph, Missouri, on April 3, 1882, that Jesse James was murdered by Robert Ford, who in his turn was killed by a Texas gun-fighter.

Cole Younger worked his brothers and others into a gang of bank robbers and either got them killed or into the Stillwater Penitentiary.

Most of the others continued to drift their respective ways, plundering and killing.

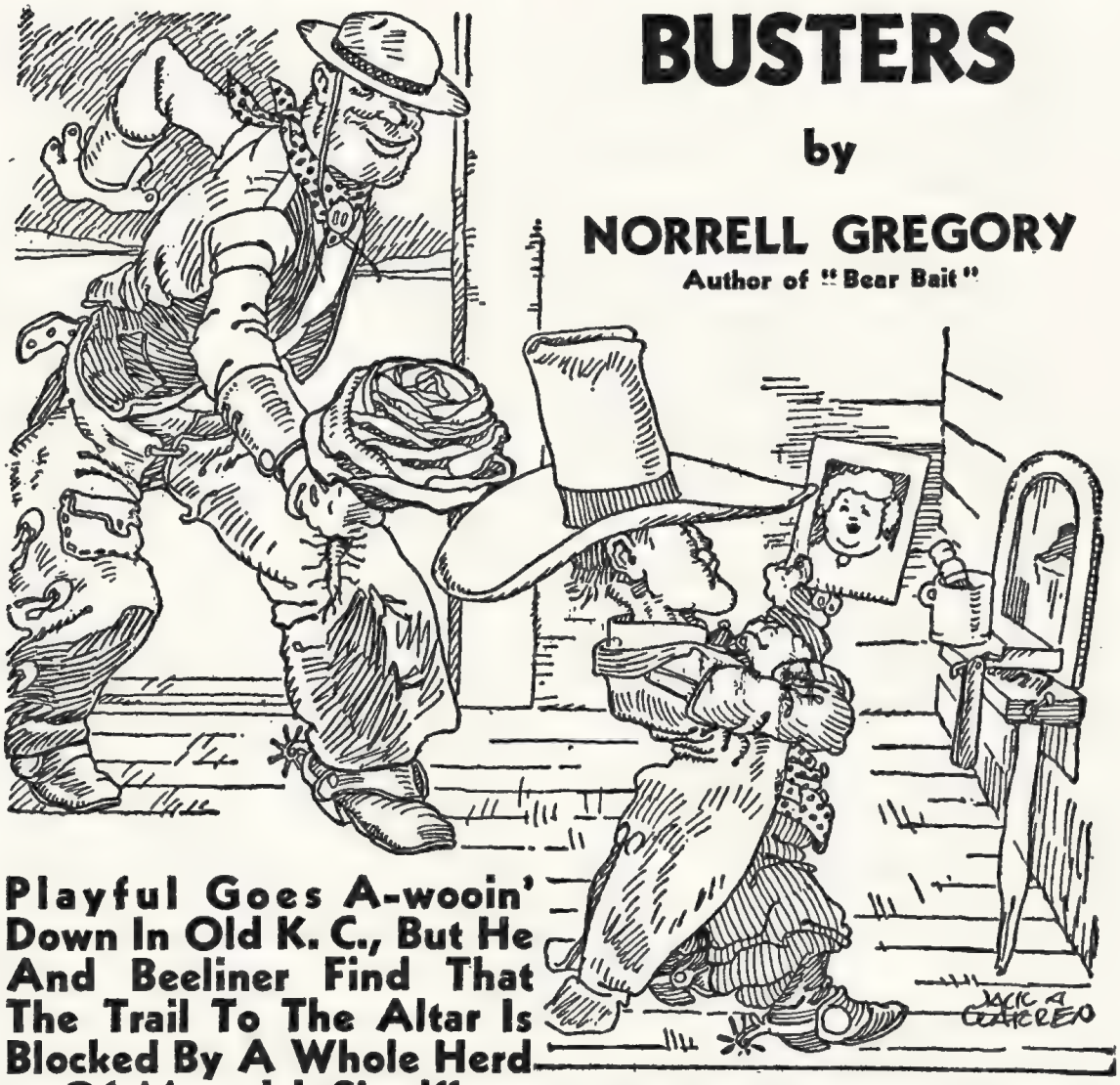
Verily the influence of William Clarke Quantrell went far!

KANSAS CITY TROUBLE BUSTERS

by

NORRELL GREGORY

Author of "Bear Bait"



Playful Goes A-wooin' Down In Old K. C., But He And Beeliner Find That The Trail To The Altar Is Blocked By A Whole Herd Of Maverick Sheriffs

"Here's to the hefty bride," Playful orated. "To the lady who'll marry an old stove-in cowpoke like you."

"Make out my time!" Beeliner raged at his boss, Shanty Funcannon. "I ain't rustlin' no more corral poles f' you. I ain't feedin' no more dogies; I ain't ever doin' nothing for you again. I'm done!"

Beeliner's enormous head was wagging like an old bear with a tremendous grouch on. Shanty stood by with drooping jaws, too astonished to say a word. For once, Playful, Beeliner's huge saddle pard, was likewise speechless.

Shanty recovered his voice with a bellow. With his graying red hair and beard all a-bristle, his blue eyes steely, he roared at them as they lounged in the bunkhouse.

He completely ignored Beeliner's declaration of freedom. "What the hell you mean deadbeatin' here when y'ort to be at work? Git goin'!" and Shanty gestured so fiercely that Playful fell over a bunk in his haste to put space between himself and Shanty.

Not so Beeliner. Usually he was first to give ground. Now he stepped to meet his employer with his enormous head wag-

ging grotesquely on his little body, snatched up a boot jack.

"Don't crowd me, boss!" he said warningly. "Don't crowd me! I'll lay ye out—I swear I will."

Playful saw Beeliner was desperate, and knew that Shanty wouldn't back up. So he caught him and held him. Shanty tamed down quickly.

"What in hell's he been drinkin'?" he asked.

"Tell Shanty what you just tole me, Beeliner," Playful ordered his partner, who by now had cooled down somewhat.

"I'm goin' to get married, boss," Beeliner said, his Adam's apple coursing up and down his long, thin neck.

Militant old Shanty Funcannon snorted like a war horse. "Married!" he exclaimed. "I reckon this all come out of the item Ma read you two from the Kansas City paper the other night. Why one look at Beeliner's mug and most women would have to git smellin' salts, or something stronger."

Ma Funcannon often read the paper aloud for the benefit of their two hands, Playful and Beeliner, for neither of them could read. That night Shanty referred to, she had read them an item about a woman down in Kansas City who wanted to correspond with a rancher—object matrimony.

"Show him the pitcher of the woman who'd marry an old spavined maverick like you, Beeliner," Playful ordered, letting out a guffaw.

Then Beeliner got mad. He showed Shanty a letter, and a picture. Shanty peered at the picture. "She's shore got the heft," he declared. "You cut this out of a paper, Beeliner."

"Nossir! That's the picture uv the woman I aim to marry. I got it all fixed up. The postmaster done the writing for me. I'm pullin out fer K. C. t'morry. Make my check out, boss. I'm quittin'."

"You, too?" Shanty looked at Playful.

"Boss, I'll have to tail along and see after him," said Playful.

Shanty turned without a word and stalked for the house.

Beeliner puffed out his bony chest like a rooster pigeon in the mating season.

"See," he boasted, "he ain't so tough. If I had half the heft of you, Playful, I'd ot tied a knot in that bow-laigged runt's tail a long time ago."

Then Beeliner yanked a big package out from under the bed. Playful gasped. "What you got there, Beeliner?"

"Clothes."

"In a bear's hind end!" gibed Playful. "You got some likker, Beeliner."

"I ain't!" vowed Beeliner, and showed him.

Sure enough it was a suit of clothes: black clothes—a long tailed coat with shiny lapels and two pairs of pants.

Playful scratched his head and stared. His head was the only small thing about him; otherwise he was built like a percheron stud horse.

"Well, damn my eyeballs! Jist like them you see in pictures! I'd shore admire to see how she fits. Mebby she won't fit, Beeliner."

"Yes 'twill." Beeliner began to shuck his boots. "I ordered the biggest size they had." Then he took off his pants.

Playful stared at Beeliner's knotty shanks with undisguised astonishment.

"Hell, Beeliner, I never knowed you was spavined that bad!"

"Who wouldn't be spavined workin' for that ol' woodpecker?" Beeliner wanted to know dourly. He drew on the pants. "How do they set?"

Playful hooked a huge forefinger inside the waistband and held out some ten inches of slack.

"If you had a couple hindquarters of a steer back of 'em you might fill 'em out," he said. "Try the coat."

That suit had been built for a man with a generous waistline, and Beeliner was thin

—thin as a rice straw. The coat hung on him like a sack on a scarecrow.

"I can set the buttons over," said Beeliner optimistically.

Playful eyed the extra pair of pants.

"Aim t' wear both pair?"

"You reckon it's customary?" Beeliner asked doubtfully. "You try 'em on, Playful."

Playful was willing. He horsed off his boots and Levis. Stuck one mighty leg through the pants and worked them up. Then the other. He looked as if he had been poured into them.

"Mebby we can git a coat to match 'em in K. C.," Beeliner observed.

Shanty came back then with two slips of pink paper in his hand.

"Here you are, boys," he said disconsolately. "Shore sorry to lose ye. If you want, I'll drive you over to town in the buckboard."

Beeliner never batted an eye. Just took the checks and handed one to Playful.

"Yeah, do that," he said. "And git a move on and mebby we can make the train today."

"I'll have them ready by the time you are," said Shanty meekly, and went out. Playful stared after him with his jaw dropping.

"Bad sign!" he hissed. "The boss is too damned sanctified, Beeliner."

"He knows he can't bluff us no longer," said Beeliner. "We ort to have called him a long time ago."

Shanty was good as his word. He put the road team to the buckboard and whirled them over to town in record time. At the bank he stopped the team.

"Drive on down to the depot," he directed. "I'll be down in a minute."

The boys arrived at the depot in time to see the train pull out.

"Don't that beat hell!" said Beeliner. "Now we'll have to lay over till tomorry."

"We gotta git our checks cashed anyhow," said Playful, looking after the train.

Shanty came down presently.

"Missed the local, huh?" he said. "Well mebby the agent can flag the flyer. I'll see about it while you boys has your checks cashed."

"Yeah," said Beeliner. "Do that."

At the bank they presented their checks.

"Might as well gimme my whole roll," said Beeliner. "Don't know whether I'll ever light in this burg agin."

"Quitting Shanty?" asked the cashier.

"I swear we are!"

"Ol' Beeliner's gittin' married," Playful explained.

"Want your money too?"

"Yeah. I gotta go along an' see after Beeliner" said Playful.

The cashier gave them their money—two great rolls of it, the proceeds of a lucky cattle deal. They took it and came back to the station just as Shanty came out.

"Boys," he said, "if you ride the flyer you'll have to take a sleeper. It's expensive."

"Damn the expense!" said Beeliner recklessly. "We'll ride her."

"Hell, yes," said Playful. "Me'n ol' Beeliner can ride anything with hair or hoofs, er without."

"Well, git your tickets then," said Shanty.

So Beeliner ambled up to the window and bought two tickets to K. C. Pulled out his roll and paid for both without batting an eye, although the cost was almost as much as his wages had been for a year.

"Due in about thirty minutes," said the agent, and went out to set the signal.

"Then we got time to git a shot of Clamp's Forty-rod," said Beeliner.

At Clamp Doby's bar he ordered two drinks—big ones.

"Give us a couple quarts to take along," he directed importantly and peeled a fifty dollar bill from his roll.

"Celebratin'?" Clamp reached under the bar for the liquor.

"Ol' Beeliner's gittin' married," Playful explained.

"Yeah," said Beeliner, and showed Clamp the picture.

"Plenty hefty," said Clamp, grinning.

"I like 'em with heft," said Beeliner.

He stuck the bottle of liquor in his hip pocket. It made a great bulge under his coat that was an absolute deformity. Playful's pants were so tight that he couldn't force his bottle into a pocket, so he tucked it under his arm. A distant whistle smote the air.

"She's a comin, ol' hoss," said Playful.

The flyer came thundering to a stop as they reached the platform. A porter sprang down and set a stool. Beeliner with Playful hard on his heels surged up the steps.

"So-long boys!" Shanty bawled from the platform, and the engine hit the drawbars.

Playful blew a blast on his nose.

"Shanty 'ain't sich a bad cuss," he said.

"Have a drink, podner," said Beeliner, uncorking his bottle.

The conductor hesitated; looked at the bottle longingly.

"Bring it back to the wash room directly," he said and passed on.

A porter came down the isle, carrying a step ladder. He set it down opposite them and a fat man dressed in sleeping togs waddled down the aisle and climbed, puffing. The boys watched him disappear into an upper berth with undisguised amazement. Then Playful grinned widely.

"I wondered whur in hell the bunks was," he said cheerfully. "Reckon we'd better pick us out one before they're all took, Beeliner?"

"Yeah," said Beeliner, wagging his head.

Playful took a big pull at his bottle, set it in the window beside Beeliner's, and started forth. He was tall enough to see, by stretching a little, into the upper berths.

"Kansas City, Here We Come! Our Powder's Dry An' We Aim To Have Our Fun!"

"I swear he 'ain't!" said Beeliner with surprising fervor.

It was sundown when they entered the car, and all the berths were made up but theirs. It was their first experience in a sleeping car and they went down the curtained isle cautiously, looking for a seat.

"There's one way back at the end," Playful pointed with the neck of his bottle. "Little more'n and we'd of had to stood up, ol' hoss."

"Would for a fact," agreed Beeliner.

They sat down. The bottle of liquor hurt Beeliner's hip so he took it out and set it in the window. The strangeness of their surroundings and the affluence of the car had a subduing effect on them. They rode several miles without a word—getting oriented. Then the conductor came along and looked at their tickets.

He parted the curtains of the one next to that into which the fat man had disappeared. There was a muffled scream, and Playful jerked his head out and backed off hurriedly.

"Wrong stall!" he muttered.

Then he tried another, and again jerked his head out, followed by a stream of invectives. Tried two more, then came back to Beeliner.

"Ol' hoss," he said, "we're outa luck. Ever' damn one of them bunks is took."

"That's a hell of a note!" complained Beeliner.

The porter came through the car.

"De conductor tole me to tell you gent'mens he in d' wash room now," he said guardedly.

"Where abouts, podner?" Beeliner said, getting up and glaring around.

The porter showed them the wash room. The conductor was there—waiting. He sampled first Beeliner's bottle, then Playful insisted that he hit his. The conductor obliged. Gasped and dashed the water out of his eyes.

"K-keep that stuff hid, b-boys," he managed. "Against regulations."

Playful tried again to put his into his hip pocket. Failed again. The conductor opened a linen closet.

"Put it in there," he said.

Playful took a mighty pull at it before doing so. Beeliner did likewise with his.

"Make yourself at home, boys," said the conductor, and went out, swaying more than was absolutely necessary from the lurch of the train.

Then the boys went back to their seat. Rather to where their seat had been. Now it had disappeared. Only blank, green curtains greeted them, and all looked alike.

Playful bugged his eyes.

"Ain't this a hell of a note!" he said.

"It was right across from whur that pot-bellied rannie clum the ladder," asserted Beeliner.

"Yeah, but whur did he climb?" Playful wanted to know.

"Wait till he snores agin," said Beeliner.

The fat man snored obligingly, and they found the right berth. Playful parted the top curtains and peeped in cautiously.

"All right," he said. "Ain't nobody slipped in on us yit."

Beeliner craned his long neck to have a look.

"Take holt of that winder and I'll give ye a boost," directed Playful.

Beeliner gripped the edge of the upper bunk and poised himself. Playful seized him by the legs and almost threw him through the roof of the car.

"Make it?" puffed Playful.

"Yeah," said Beeliner dourly, "but y' mashed my hat."

"Damn th' hat! Git in th' clear—I'm comin' up!"

Playful was big, but he was active as a cat. He gripped the edge of the berth and gave a driving leap. The car reeled from the shock, but Playful got up far enough to hook his elbows over the berth, and then with Beeliner helping he made it the rest of the way, but it was a tussle, and Playful all but demolished the car in the mad scramble upward.

"Hell fire, Beeliner," said Playful, "there ain't room in here for a man to take a good breath. You'll have to sleep in the hammick," and he indicated the clothing net which was slung alongside the window.

Beeliner protested.

"You know damn well that won't hold me, Playful. Reckon it was put there for kids."

"Yeah," said Playful. "Mebby it wus." He stretched his neck and looked down into the berth below. "Ain't nobody down there. Believe I'll move in, Beeliner."

So Playful crawled down into the lower berth, tugged off his boots and composed himself to sleep. He was lucky, since that particular berth was not sold, and neither of them awoke until the following day, when the train was pulling into Kansas City.

The train, rocketing through a maze of switches, awoke Playful. He sat up; bumped his head on the berth above, and that awoke Beeliner. Playful pulled on his boots and crawled out into the isle just as Beeliner showed his posterior end, backing down. Beeliner made it safely, and they went back to the washroom. Found two sadly depleted bottles.

"Likker 'vaperates' to beat hell!" grumbled Playful.

"I swear it does!" agreed Beeliner.

So they put a stop to that and dropped the bottles out the window. Then the porter went through the train, calling the station. After they had disembarked they stood confused while the crowd swirled around them.

"You know whur your woman lives, Beeliner?"

Beeliner pulled out the picture.

"It's on the back," he said.

"Jist as well be on the back of our necks," grumbled Playful. "We c'd read it jist as quick. We gotta find somebody that can read."

"Yeah, and we gotta find somethin' to keep us from cavin' in with," declared Beeliner. "I'm holler plumb to my toe-nails."

Then Playful remembered that they had taken nothing except the liquor since leaving home. He hailed a red cap.

"Say, podner, c'd yuh tells us whur we c'd put on a nose bag?" he asked.

The red cap looked puzzled, then grinned.

"Restaurant?" he asked.

"And damn the expense," said Beeliner.

"Right in there," he pointed.

They went through the door he indicated. It was a gorgeous place. Playful's feet shot skyward the first step he made. But like a cat, Playful came down right side up.

"Look out!" he hissed at Beeliner. "She's slick as a steer's gut!"

They saw an unoccupied table and made for it. A waiter was standing behind one of the chairs when they arrived. He put his hands on the back of Playful's chair, ready to shove it forward as Playful sat down. Playful straightened quickly and looked around at him. The waiter dropped his hands and stared off across the dining room. Playful started to sit down again, and again the waiter made a motion to shove his chair in.

This time Playful turned clear around and fixed the man with a hard eye.

"Podner," he said with gentle ominousness, "you jerk that cheer out from under me and I'll jist naturally unjint ya! I seen you the first time."

The waiter dropped his hands from the chair as if it had suddenly grown red hot. Backed off two or three steps and stood there until Playful cautiously sat down.

"Gotta watch these oleanders!" Playful hissed at Beeliner.

The waiter laid a bill of fare before each of them and hurried away. Playful took up the list and looked at it from all sides.

"You don't reckon he aims for us to start on this, do you, Beeliner?" he asked.

"You never can tell!" said Beeliner.

Another waiter, seeing their obvious perplexity, appeared.

"Can I help you, gentlemen?" he asked.

"You shore as hell can!" said Playful. "Bring us some grub, and plenty of it."

"—an' damn th' expense!" said Beeliner.

"What would you like to have?"

"Well," said Playful, "I'd admire t' have a bowl of calf slobber and a couple slabs offa long two year old's hip, f' a starter."

"Yeah," said Beeliner, his mouth beginning to drool, "an' bring me th' same pair."

The waiter looked pained. Took up the bill of fare and looked at it.

"I'm afraid you won't find that here," he said, tapping the paper.

"I know damn well we won't!" said Playful. "We already looked. If there's anything that looks like beef on that there—"

"Oh," said the waiter, "you want beef, do you?"

"—an' calf slobber," said Playful.

That waiter showed his intelligence. He had fed many a hungry range man.

"I'll take care of you," he said, and went drifting over the floor.

After a considerable time he came back, pushing a little wagon which was laden with food. Some of it they didn't recognize, but there was roast beef and certain other staples which they did.

They ate everything he brought and then sent him back for the same thing again. Ate that, then had him to bring the order the third time. The waiter was beginning to look worried. He stuck close after he had delivered the third dinner.

A button popped on Playful's waist band. He pushed his plate back.

"What's the damage, podner?" Playful asked the waiter.

The waiter scribbled on a piece of paper and laid the paper before them.

"You can pay the cashier," he said, and pointed to a little glass window near the door. "Of course if you want to give me anything for serving you—"

"Don't you git no pay for workin' here, podner? Beeliner, give him a nickel."

Beeliner dug up a nickel and gave it to the waiter, gravely. Then he picked up the slip of paper and set his course for the cashier's window. Slid the paper through the little opening in the bottom of the glass, and reached for his roll.

"Sixteen-fifty," said the cashier, glancing at the slip.

Beeliner, who was just wetting his thumb, stopped the motion in mid air.

"I'm jist payin' for one meal, podner," he said gently. "We wusn't figgerin' on stayin' a week."

"Sixteen-fifty," repeated the cashier, his eyes glassy.

Manfully Beeliner peeled off a fifty dollar bill and sifted it through the hole. The cashier snatched it up and was about to slap it into the register when something caused him to halt. He held the bill up and looked through it at the light.

"Just a minute," he said, "I'll have to get some change." He walked away.

They waited several moments. Playful, growing impatient, turned to speak to Beeliner.

"Beeliner—" he began.

An iron hand closed on his arm. A deft hand slipped into his pocket, and out again. He was aware of a broad, blue clad chest and a badge that flashed brightly. Then he saw a second cop frisking Beeliner. The cashier suddenly appeared.

"Here's the bill he gave me," the cashier said. "Compare it with their rolls. All bogus!"

It had all happened so suddenly, so smoothly, that Playful was dazed. He came to in time to see his roll disappear into the pocket of the policeman that held him by the arm, and to hear the policeman say:

"Come along—you!"

Playful stood still. His eyes began to burn.

"Podner," he said, "hand that money over!"

Even a policeman could not mistake the meaning of that light in Playful's eyes. Too late he drew his billy.

Playful hit him; not hard, but down went the policeman and slid a little ways on the marble floor. Then Playful turned and cuffed the officer that was holding Beeliner's arm. Not hard, but the fellow staggered clear across the room before he could recover his balance.

"Turn in the riot call!" bawled the first policeman, without getting up. Then he got to his feet, set himself and came at Playful with his billy flailing.

Playful hit him in earnest this time. Knocked him clear back into a nest of tables which upset along with sundry customers and dishes.

"Now then, Beeliner," quoth Playful, "you git your roll and I'll git mine."

There was the clamor of a patrol bell outside; a shrill whistle, the pounding of feet, then in through the door charged a whole company of bluecoats. Playful turned to greet them. They charged him in a body.

Wham! another billy landed on his ear. Then Playful got mad. He came in with his head down and for a few moments the room was full of bluecoats. Playful chased the last one out the door.

Beeliner stuck his long neck out the door and looked this way and that.

"More a-comin'," he said laconically. "Whole herd of 'em."

Playful stepped to the door for a look.

"C'mon, Beeliner, let's git outside whur we'll have more room. Looks like there's enuff f' us both to git some exercise."

There were more policemen than Playful figured on; it seemed that the entire K.C. force was congregating on that point. More kept coming all the time. Too, they were hampered by a big meal. The pack got so dense around Playful that whenever he hit one he knocked down a dozen. The entire street was blocked and windows were crashing all along the block. It was riot for fair, and the going plenty hot, even for Playful.

"C'mon, ol' hoss!" he puffed at Beeliner. "You ain't hittin' hard enuff. We never will git 'em all down if you don't hit 'em so's they stay hit!"

The press shifted away from the restaurant, out over the viaduct where the railroad tracks went into the station. Beeliner was weakening rapidly, and even Playful's blows were less telling. They found themselves jammed back against the parapet of the viaduct. A freight train, pulling out, showered them with a hot blast of smoke and cinders. Playful glanced down into an empty coal car. When he looked back Beeliner was down.

Playful cleared a short space before him, caught Beeliner by the collar, lifted him over the parapet and let him drop. Beeliner hit a coal car, and Playful, vaulting the parapet, landed beside him. Two or three policemen climbed the parapet as if they would follow—but didn't. That train was headed west.

They arrived at the ranch two days later exactly. Both of them bore visible evidence of rough going—especially Playful, who had been the main target of the police attack. But Playful was grinning—somewhat lopsidedly, it is true.

"Well!" barked Shanty, "back again, I see. What the hell's happened to ye—train run over ye?"

"Nah!" said Beeliner. "Me'n ol' Beeliner jist had a little argument with them sheriffs down in K.C. Boss, I never realized there was so damn many sheriffs in the world!"

"A-ha!" said Shanty. "Hung it on ye, did they?"

"We didn't come out s' bad, did we, Beeliner?" said Playful cheerfully.

Beeliner wagged his head rather feebly. He had only one eye open and there was a great knot on his jaw that hung almost to his shoulder.

"Boss," he croaked, "they tuk our money away from us. Said it was bogus money."

"Yeah," said Playful, "but we give 'em a hell of a run for it, boss. If ol' Beeliner hadn't got down on me we'd got it back."

"Reckon you want your jobs back?" snapped Shanty.

"Yeah. Ol' Beeliner decided he don't want no woman. Do you, Beeliner?"

"Don't want nothin' but some linimint!" groaned Beeliner. "I never will be worth a damn any more."

"Well git down to the bunk house and start doctorin' up!" snarled Shanty. "I be damned if I pay wages to a pair of cripples."

They got out—gladly.

"But, Shanty," protested Ma, "that's a shame about their money. I don't think that was right."

Shanty grinned like a cat.

"They're money is right where it belongs," he said. "Over t' town in th' bank. I knowed they'd get jipped out of it if they took it with them. So I had the cashier to give 'em some bogus money he had, and I fixed it at the station and saloon so they wouldn't get wise."

"Shanty!"

"Now lissen!" said Shanty earnestly. "You know dog-gone well that I've been having a hell of a time with them two rannies ever since they got that money. They still got it, 'ain't they? And that damned Playful has got enough fightin' to last him the rest of his days—even if it did take the whole K.C. police force to give it to him. He'll stay put now."

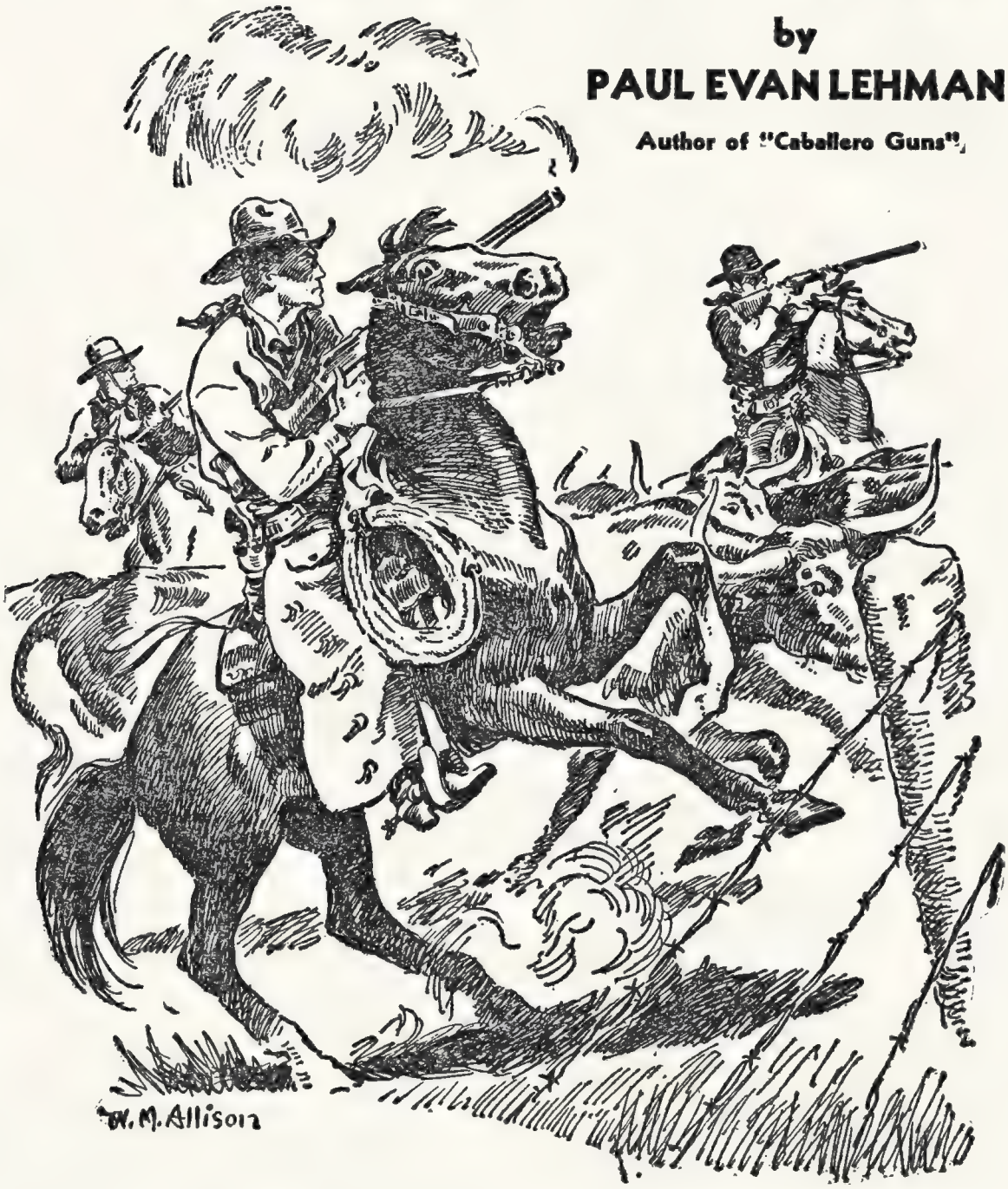
"I wonder!" said Ma, with a skeptical light in her eyes.

BULLETS AND

by

PAUL EVAN LEHMAN

Author of "Caballero Guns"



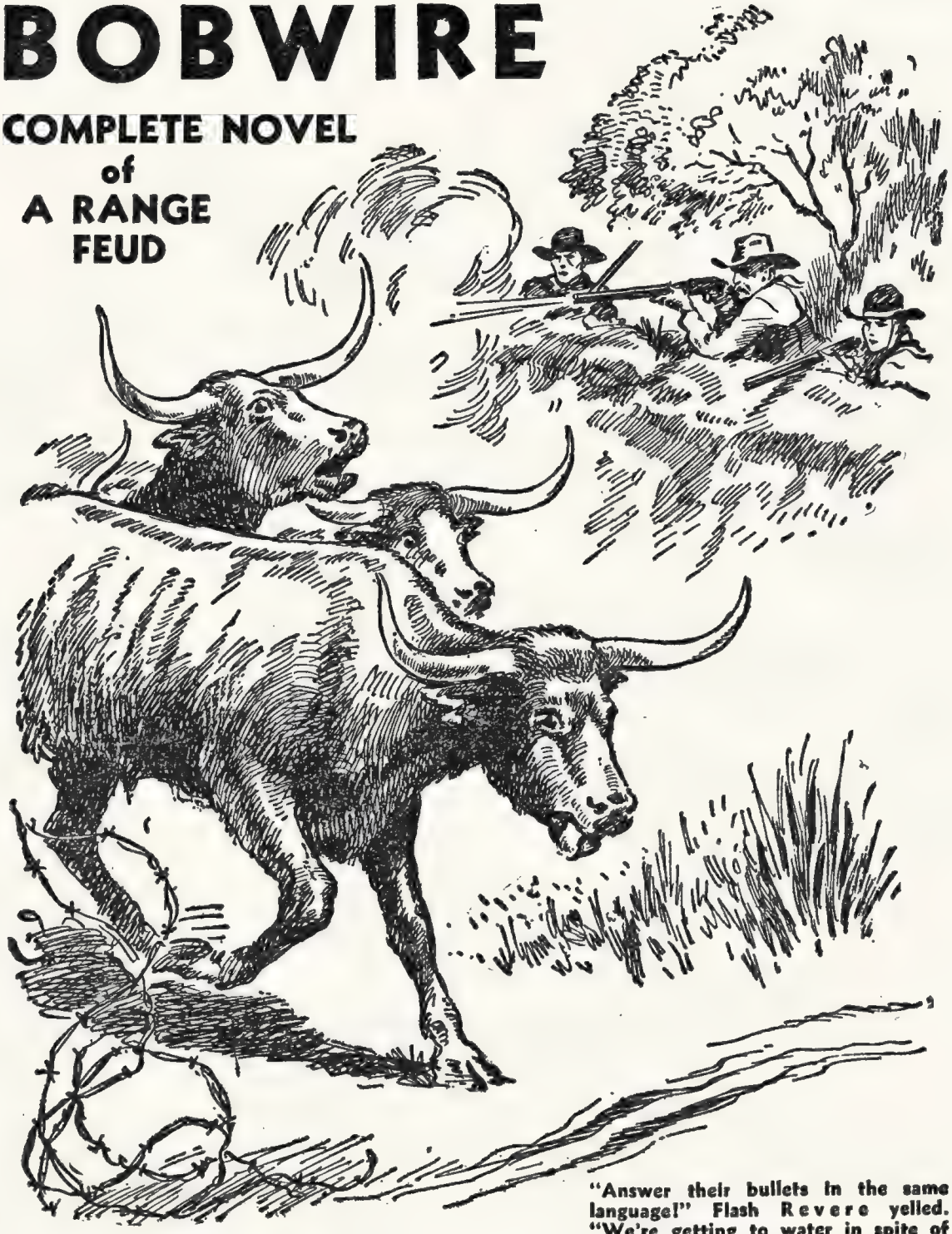
Jefferson Davis Revere stretched his lithe arms far above his head to ease the saddle cramp, his eyes meanwhile observing the line of false fronts that constituted the town of Hondo. *Hondo de inferno,* the bottom of hell, the town had been christened after a particularly bloody six-gun brawl, but to Jeff it seemed at first sight to be only a drowsy cowtown.

"Looking for a job, cowboy?"

The Water Rights War Is Fought To The Tune Of A

BOBWIRE

COMPLETE NOVEL of A RANGE FEUD



"Answer their bullets in the same language!" Flash Revere yelled. "We're getting to water in spite of lead and barbed wire!"

Jeff glanced up at the girl who addressed him from the sidewalk above. He dragged his Stetson from his head as his brain recorded only one impression. He was looking upon the most beautiful young woman he had ever seen. He noted the tendrils of warm brown hair that showed beneath her hat; the violet eyes.

"I asked you if you were looking for a job. How about it, cowboy?"

Bullet Ballad, Played On Three Strands Of Barbed Wire

Jeff grinned boyishly. "Sorry. I'd admire to work for you, ma'am, but I've already got me a job with a big outfit. Reckon you've heard of it: the K-Bar of the Kruger Cattle Company."

The smile on her face faded, the violet eyes lost their warmth. "Then you're Jeff Revere, aren't you? New manager of the mighty K-Bar." Her tones were searing.

Jeff did not smile. "That's me, ma'am."

She continued hotly. "The man who is to direct the stealing of the range from honest cattlemen. It happens I'm Nancy Brent, and I aim to protect the range that's been used by the Brents since 1871. Range hogs and killers, all of you." The girl had not raised her voice but there was in it a quality that cut.

"And of the whole crowd," she continued, "the ones I despise most are the miserable little hirelings like yourself who are willing to kill and steal for pay. Look out for me, for I'll be riding the range with a rifle on my saddle, and I'll make it my business to be looking for you! And if you ever come within range, I'll shoot you as I would a rattler. That's all, Jeff Revere!"

Lips tightly compressed, she flashed about and was gone.

Jeff stared after her. Something was twisted, somehow, for why should she thus hurl accusations at the Kruger Cattle Company? He had found no reason to lose faith in the company that was big and efficient and powerful. Jeff had come from a spread belonging to the company, two hundred miles away, one of the many huge ranches owned by the Kruger people. Amos Kruger, the big boss, lived right here in Hondo.

Jeff stared unseeingly at the hat he still gripped in his hands, mechanically brushed it and placed it on his head, then, with a little shrug of dismissal, ducked beneath the railing and walked into the bank building.

He addressed a teller. "I'm lookin' for Mr. Amos Kruger."

The man nodded toward a row of offices at the rear of the building. "He's busy right now. Have a chair."

Jeff turned away, but as he did so one of the office doors opened and the cowboy had a glimpse of a big man whose face at the moment was flushed with anger. Just a glimpse, then the big man turned and bellowed at somebody inside.

"You carry out yo're threat and it's war! You hear me? War!"

Wheeling, the man pulled the door shut behind him and stepped from the office, eyes flaming, heavy boots pounding the floor until it shook beneath him.

The door opened again and another man stood in the entrance. He was tall and lean and hawkish, and probably because of his height, stooped slightly so that his head was a bit outthrust. His eyes were glittering and his jaws were clamped. For a short space he glared after the departed one, then snapped an order to the teller.

"If he returns, I'm not in."

"Yes, sir." The clerk nodded towards Jeff. "Gentleman to see you."

The tall man turned and eyed Jeff. "Who are you?"

"Name's Revere; from the Circle-K."

The face lost some of its fierceness. Kruger studied Revere intently, running his sharp eyes over Jeff from head to foot. Finally he nodded.

"Come in," he invited, turning back into the office.

Jeff followed, closed the door, and accepted a chair by the other's desk. Kruger leaned back and again studied him. "So you're the man Murphy recommended. 'Flash' Revere, I believe they call you."

Jeff's face tightened. "Not when I'm listenin'. I don't like the name; it suggests a killer. Happens I'm right handy with a six-gun, but I never killed a man in my life."

Kruger nodded grimly. "You may come to it yet. Revere, the company has picked you from some hundreds of employees for a job which will make you if you carry it

through successfully. You have a chance to become foreman of one of our largest spreads; furthermore, you will be given a share in the company's holdings that will provide for you in your old age."

"This is my big chance," said Jeff quietly. "I aim to please."

"That's the spirit. Now listen. Our K-Bar outfit is expanding. Got to. It is located in a valley beyond Hondo, most of which we have acquired by purchase or —other means. Half way through the valley a lateral pocket some two miles wide and eight long cuts back into the mountains. It is held by a rancher named Brent. He was just in to see me. I offered him a fair price for his holdings and he refused. We must get that range, and since he declines to sell it, it will mean war."

"Seems like I heard him mention somethin' to that effect," drawled Jeff.

"This is open range," Kruger went on. "It belongs to the man who can take it and hold it. The only bit that Brent lawfully owns is a half-section at the foot of the hills which he homesteaded. We don't want that, but we do want the rest of this range. We're going to take it, and you are the man to do the taking."

Revere nodded eagerly. At the moment he felt no compunction at this forcible assumption of another man's range. It was the old law of might and right; a law as old as the West itself.

"How am I to go about this takin'?"

"Any way you want to. You have our whole resources behind you: men, material, and money. The K-Bar has a crew of fifty; if you need more, hire them. Horses, ammunition, rifles—anything you need, you may order. But get that range."

Revere stood up. "When do I start?"

"Right now. Ride due west out of town. Take the first trail to your left. A man called Huggins is in charge. He will give you any information you require. Now come out and meet the cashier of the bank."

Jeff walked with him to the grilled partition. Kruger addressed a man behind it. "Parkinson, this is Jeff Revere, my new foreman. Honor any requisition he may make on you. Good luck, Revere."

Jeff walked over to the hitching rack, his mind still full of his glorious opportunity. A young man, lithe and lazy appearing, was leaning against the rail watching him. Jeff nodded and received a friendly "howdy" in return.

"You work for the K-Bar by any chance?" Jeff asked.

"Shore do. Name's Lane. The boys call me 'Weary'," replied the languid cowboy.

"If you're ridin' out to the ranch I'd admire to tag along."

"Shore. We been expectin' you. Cowboy, you got a job of work to do. George Brent ain't gonna sit down and suck his thumb while we're plantin' K-Bar beef on his range. No, sir. And Miss Nancy, neither."

"So I gathered a minute ago," drawled Jeff.

They mounted and rode through the town together, coming presently to the fork in the trail. Weary led the way to the left. Jeff found himself riding across the wide floor of a valley through the middle of which meandered a stream of good water. At the top of a ridge Jeff reined in and surveyed the country.

Weary pointed out a gap in the northern range of hills some miles ahead and to their right. "There's the pocket where Brent runs his cattle. It's seven or eight miles long and about two wide. George uses the creek to water his stock, and has run a line of fence from the hills to the

stream on both sides of the gap. If we put stock on his range we got to bust through one of them fences or shove 'em across the creek. Over there," he pointed to the left, "is the K-Bar."

BLOODY PROMISE

An hour later they topped another ridge to find the K-Bar almost at their feet. Jeff saw huge corrals, two bunkhouses, a moss shack, blacksmith shop, and harness sheds. As they halted at the ranch house, a big man with beetling brows and a shock of red hair descended from the veranda.

"Red," said Weary, "meet up with the new boss. Revere, this is Red Huggins."

Huggins squinted appraisingly, thumbs hooked in the crossed cartridge belts, a grin that was almost a leer on his freckled face. "Damned if the boss ain't loadin' the K-Bar up with kids," he grunted. "How are you, Revere?"

Jeff shook hands perfunctorily. Just as he had liked Weary at first glance, he disliked this man in an equally short space of time. He put up his horse and went into the house.

The place was untidy, the floors tracked up with dust from the boots of Huggins. Jeff found a Chinese boy napping in the kitchen and set him to work with scrub bucket and brush. Huggins watched with a sardonic leer on his face.

"You can take yo're things to the bunkhouse, Huggins," Jeff said calmly.

The big man flushed. "Whadda you mean? I'm segundo; I bunk in here."

"I haven't picked my segundo yet, and you bunk with the men. You take yo're orders from me just like the rest of the crew."

"Like hell I do!"

"Either that or get your time."

"Why, you—!" Red jerked at both guns, not with any intention of shooting, but merely to put this kid in his place. To his surprise he found himself blinking into the muzzle of a .44 that had magically appeared and that did not waver in the least. Behind the gun was a face as grim as granite.

"The bunkhouse or quit; which is it, Red?"

With a curse, Huggins slouched past him and, Jeff at his heels, entered a bedroom. Red gathered together his belongings, flashed a sidelong glance at the lounging Jeff, and stamped out of the house.

The scrubbing completed, the Chinese boy prepared dinner. The food was good and well cooked. Jeff finished his meal, caught up his horse, and rode across the range. A rider spurred from behind the bunkhouse in pursuit, and Jeff drew up. Weary joined him, still wearing his lazy grin.

"Don't know whether you crave my comp'ny or not," he said. "But if you aim to scout the range you might find me useful to answer questions."

They rode for a while in silence, then Weary spoke, apparently at random.

"Funny how some folks get exaggerated ideas of their ability. Figger the world just cain't get along without them. Give 'em a little authority, and they swell up like poisoned pups; take it away, and they turn rattlesnake mean."

"Uh-huh," agreed Jeff, knowing that Weary referred to Red Huggins.

"I knowed a fella like that," Weary went on. "Accident raised him out of the bunkhouse and put him in charge of a cow spread until the real boss could arrive. He knowed his job was only temporary, but he strutted around like a bantam rooster. And when the real boss arrived, he just couldn't slide back into his place. No, sir. And when he was gently shoved back he took to cussin' and oilin' his guns and spillin' over at the mouth. He was plum disgustin'."

"What happened to him?"

"I disremember. Mebbe I wasn't there when the showdown come. Anyhow, I'm bettin' that if he took it up with the boss face to face, he got tossed back to where he belonged right suddenlike. But knowin' him as I do, I reckon he hid in some coulee and cut down on the boss when he wasn't lookin'. Anyhow, if I'd been that boss I'd have shore done my walkin' where there were no trees and kept one eye slantin' over my shoulder. Yes, sir!"

An hour later they halted among the cottonwoods that lined the creek.

"This is the present border of the K-Bar in this part of the valley," announced Weary. "Up at the far end, a man named Spear had a ranch on the other side of the creek. Kruger got possession of it and our cows are grazin' the width of the valley there.

"At the lower end was a spread owned by Sam Johnson. Kruger got that, too, and we use the width of the valley there. But for a distance of about two miles along the creek Brent ranges his stuff, holdin' the K-Bar off by fences extendin' from each side of the gap to the creek."

Jeff nodded. "Let's cross and take a look at Brent's pocket.

Fording the shallow stream, they broke through the fringe of trees on the opposite bank and rode out on Brent's range. They followed the creek to the western boundary fence, then turned back. A bit ahead of them and to their left a short wooded ridge reared itself above the plain, and quite suddenly Weary threw himself from his horse.

"Down, boss!" he yelled, and as Jeff instinctively ducked, a bullet sang over his head and an instant later he heard the spiteful crack of a rifle.

"Hold his attention," he ordered Weary, and backed rapidly toward the creek's edge, keeping his horse between him and the hidden marksman. He followed the stream until he had passed the ridge, then struck out at a right angle to a point which he judged to be opposite the hiding place of the one with the rifle. Here he plunged into the mesquite and started up the slope.

He had nearly reached the top when he noticed a sudden disturbance in a clump of bushes above him, and caught sight of a rifle barrel as it was swung about. He dropped flat as the weapon roared, swung up his six-gun and fired a random shot into the covert.

The rifle barrel dropped. For some minutes Jeff lay there watching, but no movement disturbed the bushes. Cautiously he got to his knees, then to his feet. He started to advance, gun outthrust, eyes alert for any tell-tale swaying of the brush. There was none.

Then he saw the rifle, its barrel extending beyond a clump of mesquite. Jeff reached forward and parted the branches. He stared unbelievingly for a moment, then with an oath of horror crashed through the brush and dropped to his knees before the inert form.

Jeff Revere had shot a woman; and the woman was Nancy Brent!

"Boss, what in hell have you done?" Weary Lane, having rushed to his side of the ridge at the sound of shots, was staring white-faced at the still figure on the ground.

"I had no idea it was her," said Jeff. "Get some water from the creek."

"Revere, if you've killed her—!"

Jeff glanced up wonderingly. Weary had spoken with an intensity of feeling strangely alien to his usual lazy manner. His face was set and his eyes were shining with a light that could not be misunderstood.

"I'm sorry, Weary," said Jeff quietly. "Sorry as hell. I didn't know you felt that way about her."

Lane turned and stumbled through the brush, headed for the creek, and Jeff deftly

parted the silky hair to examine the wound beneath. There was a great deal of blood, but after wiping this away he was relieved to find that the injury was apparently but scalp deep.

Weary returned with a hatful of water and together they bathed the injury and examined it more closely. Lane finally sighed his relief.

"Scalp wound," he said in his old languid tone. "What are we goin' to do now?"

"Get her to the 71," said Jeff. "We'll take turns carryin' her."

Jeff bound up the wound while Weary went for the horses. When he returned, Jeff passed the girl up to him. Lane cradled her in his arms and started off at a walk. When they were half way to the Brent ranch house, Revere persuaded him to hand over his burden.

The sun was low when they finally drew close enough to the 71 to attract attention. At once three riders came tearing over the range to meet them, Brent in advance. Not until the last moment did they slide their horses to a stop. In three swift strides Brent was at Revere's side. Jeff handed the girl to him and dismounted.

The 71 owner placed the girl on the ground, and with fingers that shook parted the brown hair and loosened the bandage. He inspected the injury briefly and rose to his feet. His face had gone white.

"Which one of you K-Bar killers did that?" he demanded.

"I did," answered Jeff.

Brent growled deep in his throat and wrenched his gun from its holster. Its muzzle swept up in an arc and halted in line with Jeff's belt buckle.

"I thought you'd do that," said Revere. He made no movement of any kind.

"You thought right. Anybody that lays a finger on my girl—"

"Reckon I should have left her lyin' on the range instead of bringin' her home to you," said Jeff quietly.

The gun muzzle wavered, dropped. "How did it happen?"

Revere told him. "I didn't know it was a woman," he concluded. "Fact is, I'd had trouble with one of my men and up to the last second I figured he had planned to dry-gulch me on yore land so's the 71 would be blamed. I fired high, aimin' to spoil the shot."

Brent expelled his pent-up breath in a sigh and slowly returned the gun to its holster. "You had no right on my range," he said. "I warned all K-Bar off, and I'm repeatin' that warnin' now. If you or any other Kruger man puts a foot across the creek or beyond my fence, we'll shoot and we'll shoot to kill. Now get out."

Jeff smiled slightly. "I don't scare right easy, Mr. Brent. The Kruger Cattle Company gave me a job to do, and I aim to do it. My advice to you is to sell yore interests and move out."

Brent's face was blazing. "I'll see Amos Kruger in hell first! Him and the whole K-Bar outfit!"

"Better think it over," advised Jeff. "Come on, Lane."

He remounted and with Weary beside him rode slowly toward the creek. Lane slouched in the saddle with his customary appearance of laziness, but his face was grave and thoughtful.

"Cowboy, it looks to me as though you got a lot of grief ahead of you. This job of puttin' K-Bar beef on 71 range don't size up like no game of postoffice. Brent is goin' to fight, and you got to remember that he's fightin' for his home. You cain't blame him. You and I'd do the same."

Jeff stared at him. "Gettin' chicken-hearted? If so, you'd better throw in with Brent right now. Me, I'm workin' for the Kruger Cattle Company."

Weary's face reddened. "Oh, I'll stick. Long as I'm workin' for the K-Bar I'll be as loyal as the next one."

"Then quit talkin' like you were sorry for Brent. Reckon I got to make some allowance for you, though, thinkin' of Miss Nancy as you do."

"Cowboy, she don't know I'm alive."

"Then I reckon it's up to you to call her attention to the fact. She's worth the love of any man. She's loyal, and spunky, and as pretty as a snow-covered mountain in the spring."

Weary slanted a glance at him. "Huh! You got it too?"

The soft lines in Jeff's face hardened. "Got hell! I'm a hard-boiled foreman of a salty outfit. I aim to plant K-Bar beef on her pa's range. She has sworn to shoot me if she can, and she's made the first try. No chance for any tender feelin's creepin' in there."

It was nearly dark when they rode up to the ranch house. Huggins was seated on the veranda, a newspaper, apparently neglected, in his lap. Jeff noticed that most of the men were gathered before the mess shack.

Huggins watched through slitted eyes as Jeff dismounted and ascended to the veranda. Revere, however, nodded casually and went into the house. Presently he came out carrying Huggins' war-bag. He stopped beside Red's chair.

"I see you moved in again," he said.

Red's right hand was beneath the edge of the paper, his forefinger cuddled against the trigger of the gun he was holding. Supremely confident, he answered:

"Yeah, I did. You can carry that stuff back into my room."

"Carry it yo'reself," snapped Jeff, and tossed the heavy bag squarely atop the newspaper. For the moment the gun which Red gripped was rendered useless, and before he could free himself of the burden Jeff had grasped his chair and jerked it sidewise. It fell with a crash and Red was sent sprawling. The gun skittered across the veranda and dropped into the dirt.

Jeff was on him like a cat. Pulling him to his feet, he gripped Red by shirt collar and breeches seat and propelled him from the porch.

"Fork yo're horse and ride," ordered Jeff, tossing the war-bag after him. "Stop at the bank and get yo're time, then keep goin'."

Huggins got to his feet, gathered the bag into his arms, and made for the horse corral. He did not look toward the crew.

Jeff swung about to face the men. "Weary here is my segundo. Tomorrow mornin' we'll shove a couple thousand head of stuff across the creek at the upper end of the valley and pile them against the fence boundin' the old Spear outfit. Then we'll cut the wire and push them through."

The cook's triangle sounded and the men piled into the mess shack. Jeff turned with Weary and started toward the house. They had just reached the steps when Huggins rode up. His face was red and his little eyes blazed.

"I'll take my gun," he said shortly.

Jeff picked up the weapon, unloaded it, and handed it to him. "You heard what I said," he told the man coldly. "Get yo're time and keep ridin."

"I will in a pig's eye!" spat Huggins. "You'll see plenty of me from now on, Jeff Revere!" He wheeled his horse and rode rapidly toward Hondo.

SMOKE-TALK

Early the following morning the K-Bar crew set to work rounding up and hazing cattle across the river to the old Spear range. Here the animals were crowded against the fence which Brent had run from the west side of the gap to the creek. Once the wire was cut, the animals would scatter over Brent's range in search of grass, and with them would go compact bodies of men to hold the range they had seized.

Revere was superintending the bringing

up of the last of the cattle when a man rode through the herd to deliver a message. "Old man Brent's over at the fence cravin' speech with you," he said.

Jeff threaded his way among the restless cattle until he was in hearing distance of the big man who sat his horse on the far side of the wire. Brent was evidently striving to hold his temper when he spoke.

"I see yo're gettin' ready to steal my range. If you feel lucky, hop to it; but I'm warnin' you that the first man that touches pliers to wire is goin' to taste lead as sure as I stand here."

Jeff did not reply. Brent turned his horse and rode toward a little dry wash which paralleled the fence some hundred yards away. He dropped over the lip of this gully and was lost to Revere's sight.

Jeff did not underestimate the seriousness of Brent's threat, nor did he doubt that the wash concealed others than Brent; but he must make an effort to cut the wire. He inched his horse through the cattle and, pliers in hand, bent from the saddle. As he did so a bullet *zinged* off the saddle horn, and the sharp report of a rifle rang out.

The horse shied, and Jeff straightened in the saddle. Beneath the smoke cloud at the edge of the gully he caught sight of a gray Stetson and a flash of white bandage. It was Nancy Brent who had shot at him and, for the second time, had come near to killing him.

Weary, a bit anxious, came working his horse through the cattle to meet Jeff. "They shootin' at you?"

Jeff nodded. "We won't try to cut the wire here," he said. "Leave enough men to hold the cattle and bring the rest across the creek."

When this order had been executed, the working crew rounded up another bunch of cattle. These were driven against the fence at the east end of Brent's spread, on what had been the Johnson range. Here, too, they met with resistance. As Jeff and Weary approached the fence with the first of the cattle, a rider spurred over a ridge and pulled up on his side of the wire.

Two Sides Of The Barbed Wire He Rode! One As Foreman Of The Mighty K-Bar, One As Hired Killer!

Jeff stared at the eccentric old man in the saddle.

"What are you doin' over there?" demanded Weary of the man.

Jack Summers shifted his Sharps buffalo gun and dragged out a plug of chewing tobacco. "Workin' for George Brent," he answered, biting off a huge chunk. "Foreman. Got clost to sixty men under me."

"Yeah, you have! Revere, meet the biggest liar in Hondo. What you aimin' to do, Summers?"

"Keep you jiggers from cuttin' this wire. I got ninety-six men behind that ridge."

"Old-timer," said Jeff calmly, "you'd better stand back and let us through. We aim to take that range sooner or later."

The old man regarded him thoughtfully. "Yeah, I reckon you will. George got a mighty fine spread and a fine bunch of cattle, all free and clear; but Kruger controls the bank and they won't lend George a cent. Without money he can't hire men, and without men he can't hold you off. It looks like you got him.

"But Brent's got a few friends, and they're with him from hell to breakfast. You lay yo're hands on that wire and yo'll damn soon find it out!" He spat copiously and started backing his horse away, the old Sharps ready for action.

Jeff and Weary exchanged glances. "Well," said the latter, "the only thing to do is to call his bluff. We got to bust through that fence."

Jeff frowned. "We could stampede those cows through the wire, but a lot of them would get hurt. Also we could wait until dark and cut the wire, but that's a sneakin' thing to do with the crew we got. Brent won't be able to guard both fences and the river at the same time. Reckon we'll gather another bunch and push them over the creek."

This they proceeded to do, the trees along both banks masking the movement. It was not until the K-Bar animals began to trickle out on 71 range that Brent's men became aware of the strategy. A few 71 riders rode down from the ridge overlooking the creek, firing their guns in an effort to stampede the cattle back across the stream. The steers refused to turn, breaking instead to right and left and scattering effectively over 71 range.

Brent was forced to withdraw most of his men who were guarding the west fence, whereupon the man left in charge of the X-Bar cattle on the Spear range promptly seized the opportunity to cut the wire in several places. The restless animals broke through the openings in numbers that constantly increased as the breaches widened. Behind them rode the men who drove them, augmented shortly by Jeff and the rest of the crew.

It was a formidable party, over forty in number. They rode in a long line, rifles slanting over their saddles, and in the face of those overwhelming odds Brent's riders were forced to run, gathering in a knot about their employer some five hundred yards away, impotent, discouraged, defeated before they were able to offer any resistance. Two figures, slighter than their companions, stood out in the group. Jeff knew one of them was Nancy.

He spoke to Weary. "Who's that other little cuss? Miss Nancy's brother?"

Weary squinted off across the rangeland, then turned a suddenly sobered face to Jeff. "She ain't got a brother. Jeff, that's her mother in shirt and overalls."

Jeff halted his horse and stared. "Her mother!"

"Yeah. Jeff, it's hell—this fightin' womenfolk. I don't like it. I'll stand up to any man in a fair fight, but when his wife and daughter grab guns and side with him, cowboy, I'm about ready to quit."

Jeff turned on him angrily. "You want yo're time?"

"I'll be thinkin' it over." Weary's eyes were steady and his face grave. "If I was workin' for any other man than you, I'd sure take it."

Jeff spurred his horse impatiently and rode away at a lope. He was angry with Weary; the lanky segundo was too chicken-hearted for a job like this. Revere checked his horse near the base of the transverse ridge from which Nancy had fired at him the day before. His anger died. After all, Weary was not so much to blame. He didn't like to fight women either; but he must keep on.

Foreman of the K-Bar at the age of twenty-four! A share in the company's holdings that would provide for his old age! Something worth fighting for!

His horse, ambling along at a walk, slipped slightly on a smooth stone and lurched off balance. And as he did so, Jeff felt a tug at his neckerchief and heard the flat report of a rifle from the heights to his left. Instantly he broke the buckskin into a run, lying low over his neck.

Again he heard the whistle of a slug and the report which followed; then he was among the trees which lined the creek. His face was white; this was carrying the thing too far. He did not mind the girl taking an occasional pot shot at him, but she was drawing her sights a bit too fine to suit him.

He followed the creek clear to the fence on the Johnson spread, then swung to his left and followed the wire to the hills. He climbed the ridge on foot, treading warily.

Half way to the top of the ridge, he heard another shot; but this time the booming report came from a six-gun. Jeff drew his own .44 and hurried on.

He reached the crest of the wooded ridge and pulled up to get his bearings. Before him, not more than twenty feet away, was the slight form of Nancy Brent. She was kneeling, and her back was toward him. Her rifle stood against a scrub oak slightly behind her.

Jeff stole forward, possessed himself of the weapon, and spoke dryly.

"Who did you dry-gulch this time?"

The girl gave a startled cry and turned. Her cheeks were wet with tears. Springing to her feet she leaped at him like a tigress, her eyes blazing.

"You killer! You hired killer!"

Jeff dropped the rifle and seized her by the wrists. Even then she kicked at him, tried even to bite his hands.

"You little devil!" said Jeff sharply. "Quit it! Quit it, I tell you!"

She ceased to struggle, more because of the realization that she was powerless than for any order of his; but the violet eyes were blazing and the white teeth tightly clenched. Jeff released her and stepped back a pace.

"Now tell me what it's all about."

She turned with a little choking sob and again dropped to her knees. Jeff strode forward and looked over her shoulder. "The devil!" he exclaimed.

George Brent was lying on his back. His eyes were closed, and the right side of his flannel shirt was soggy and crimson.

Jeff kneeled beside the girl, produced his knife, and, slitting the shirt, laid back the cloth. "Struck a rib and circled it," he told the girl after a swift examination. "The flesh is badly torn and likely the rib is broken, but you can believe me when I say it's not fatal."

The girl looked into his face and he saw some of the wild terror leave her eyes. "Are you sure?" He nodded, and again the eyes flamed. "You did it! You know you did!"

"But I didn't. I was passin' the foot of the ridge when somebody shot at me from up here. I circled and came up on foot. When I saw you kneelin' here I was sure you had done the shootin'."

"I suppose you expect me to believe you!" she cried scornfully. "It happens that the one who was up here was shooting at us. Dad started up to find out who it was. I followed him. I heard the pistol shot and hurried. I found him—like this. You did it; you know you did! Kruger told you to!"

Gravely Jeff drew his six-gun and offered it to her. "Examine it. You will find it loaded and the barrel clean."

She pushed the weapon aside. "I don't want it. I wouldn't believe you no matter what proof you offered."

Jeff returned the gun to its holster. "Have it yore way," he said.

Weary came crashing through the brush, bent over Brent to examine the wound, then straightened. "Who did it, Jeff?" he demanded.

Jeff explained shortly. "Miss Brent thinks I did," he concluded, his eyes on the girl.

Weary turned to the girl. "Beggin' yore pardon, ma'am, but I'm shore yo're wrong. I was ridin' behind Revere, heard the shots, and saw him duck and run. Somebody was shore enough shootin' at him. He didn't do it."

"You are all in the same boat!" declared Nancy hotly. "One would lie and the other would back him up. I hate you all. You've put your beef on our land; well, I hope every head withers and dies; I hope you perish with them. Range hogs and killers, all of you!"

Weary gazed into her blazing eyes. "Ma'am, I reckon yo're mostly right. I reckon we are range hogs, and some of us killers; but no matter how low I've sunk I

draw the line at fightin' women who are tryin' to save their home." He turned to Jeff. "Revere, I'm askin' for my time."

SELL OR STARVE

It was a morose and thoughtful Jeff Revere that rode down to join his men at the edge of the creek. Weary's resignation had jarred him more than he cared to admit. He had come to like the lanky cowpuncher with the lazy ways. Despite his prejudice in favor of the cattle company he was forced to grant that Weary had some basis for the stand he had taken. Range hogs, the girl had called them, and in a way she was right.

Nevertheless, Jeff was determined to go ahead with his plans. Without considering the question of loyalty to his employers, his own success was bound up with that of the Kruger Cattle Company. There must be no indecision; no faltering on the path to what was clearly his duty.

He found his men busy driving 71 stock away from the creek and seeing that the K-Bar animals became firmly established on their new pasture grounds. Toward noon the cook and bed wagons came rumbling up, heavily guarded, and camp was made among the cottonwoods.

Late that afternoon Jeff returned to the K-Bar ranch and went into the house. At one of the bedroom doors he halted. Lane was inside, packing his war-bag.

"Hello, Weary," Jeff said quietly.

Lane straightened and turned. "Hello, Jeff."

"Still determined to quit?"

"Yes. No personal feelin's, Jeff. I'm sorry as hell."

"So am I; I was countin' on you . . . Goin' over to the Brents?"

Weary smiled bleakly. "No. I might not agree with you in this thing, but I shore wouldn't fight against you. Besides, they wouldn't have me. Miss Nancy thinks me about a foot lower than the belly of a skunk."

"How'd you make out with Brent?"

"All right. Packed him down on his hawss. Jack Summers and the rest took him to the house."

"Did he recover consciousness before you left?"

"Yes. He didn't know who shot him, though. Fella heard him comin' through the brush and let him have it before George got a look at him. I got a hunch who it was."

"Reckon we both have. He shot at me —you saw that—and Miss Nancy said he shot at them. There's only one man I know who'd do that, figgerin' he'd make trouble either way."

"Yeah." Weary's face was tight. "I aim to look into that."

"Better leave it to me. I ordered him to keep ridin'."

"I would have if you hadn't . . . Well, reckon that's all."

He picked up his war-bag and turned toward the door. For an instant the two men gazed into each other's eyes, then Jeff impulsively stepped forward and grasped Weary by the arms.

"Son, won't you stay with me?"

Weary's eyes warmed, but he shook his head. "Can't do it, cowboy. You and me just can't see things from the same angle. Mebbe I'm wrong; mebbe my likin' for Miss Nancy has sorta warped my viewpoint." He laughed embarrassedly. "I'm in a hell of a fix. I want to wish you luck, and at the same time I'm hopin' George Brent will find a way to beat you."

"Brent is licked right now. What you aimin' to do?"

"I got nearly a month's pay comin'. Reckon I'll stick around town for a spell; leastwise, until I run across Red Huggins and have a talk with him. After that I'll drift."

Jeff went into the office and wrote out an order for Weary's pay. "So long, cowboy."

he said quietly. "Don't leave Hondo without seein' me."

"Sure not. So long, Jeff."

Revere watched while he caught up his horse and saddled. When Weary's form was but a dot on the trail, Jeff sighed and turned back into the house. The Chinaman had prepared supper, and he picked at it half-heartedly. It was quite dark when he reached the camp in the cottonwoods.

A buckboard was standing at one side of the fire, and a tall, stoop-shouldered man was pacing restlessly back and forth. It was Kruger. As Jeff dismounted Kruger came over to him, eyes glittering, hand outthrust.

"Well, well! Here you are at last. Glad to see you, Revere. My boy, you've done wonderful work. Cattle all across and nobody hurt. Fine!"

"We were lucky, I expect," said Jeff shortly. "And Brent didn't have the men to put up a fight. We can graze more stock any time you get them to us."

"That is what I want to see you about. Come over here where we can sit down." He led the way to a fallen tree and seated himself on its trunk. Jeff found a place beside him.

"George Brent is licked." said Kruger positively. "In a few more days his stuff will be crowded so far back in the gap that feeding and watering them will be a problem. Eventually he will have to sell; well, what's the matter with our doing the buying?"

"Nothin'; except that he won't sell to you."

"He won't sell to anybody else, I'll guarantee that. Through the bank I can bring enough pressure to bear on local cattlemen to prevent his disposing of them in that way. He'll have to sell to us."

Jeff spoke grimly. "You don't know Brent. He'll let 'em starve on the hoof before he'd sell to the Kruger Company."

"Brent has a wife and daughter," said Kruger calmly. "His only hope lies in going somewhere else and starting another spread. To do that he must have money. By disposing of his stock he can start over; by being stubborn he will find himself not only without a ranch but also without funds with which to start up another. Yes, I'm quite sure he will sell."

Jeff was incredulous. "You'd crowd him like that?"

"Certainly." Kruger's voice was hard. "My boy, this is business; sentiment has no part in it."

Jeff stared at the fire in silence, and Kruger went on. "You have made a good beginning; keep it up. One of the rules of big business is to reward handsomely the men who assist in making that business big. In time you can become independently wealthy—an officer in the company. Now this is what I want you to do next: go to George Brent and offer to buy him out. Offer him a fair price and accept his count. Nothing wrong in that, is there?"

Jeff was bound to admit that there wasn't. I can offer him the market value for his steers?"

"Yes; and accept his own count."

"And if he refuses to sell?"

Kruger hesitated a moment. "We'll take that up at the time. I can't convince myself that he will hold out in the face of such an offer."

Jeff nodded thoughtfully. "I'll see him tomorrow."

"Good." Kruger got to his feet. "I'll be driving back to town. Let me know how you make out."

He shook hands and crossed the fire to the buckboard. Jeff followed, and as his

figure was outlined against the flames, a shot rang out from the direction of the ridge. He dived into the shadows before him, landing almost atop the crouching figure of Amos Kruger.

Jeff helped his boss to his feet. Kruger was shaking with fear and anger.

"Damn their souls!" he shouted. "Tried to kill me! That was George Brent, as sure as I'm alive. Rout out the men, Revere, and get after the assassin! You hear me? Rout them out!"

"No use," said Jeff calmly. "By the time they saddle up the fellow will be far away. Besides, the jasper wasn't shootin' at you."

Kruger turned on him. "He wasn't! Then who in the name of common sense was he shooting at? That bullet—"

"Hit me," finished Jeff dryly. "Left shoulder, in the back, and high up. I was movin', and he didn't lead me enough. Don't look so sick, Mr. Kruger, it's just a scratch."

It was nearly noon of the next day before Jeff found time to leave for the 71 with Kruger's offer. He started off at a brisk lope, coming presently to the mouth of the gap, where he found his men busy turning back Brent's thirsty steers.

He saluted the crew and for the first time entered Brent's valley. Here Brent had grazed his cattle for many years; here he would soon be trapped, fighting and desperate, waging a losing war against thirst and famine. Jeff felt a stir of sympathy and swore harshly.

"Hell!" he growled. "I'm gettin' as soft as Weary."

He covered the rest of the distance in quick time, momentarily expecting to hear the screech of a bullet and the report of Nancy's rifle; but the minutes sped by with only the rhythmic thud of his horse's hoofs in his ears and nothing but grazing cattle within range of his vision.

The 71 ranch yard was deserted, and Jeff rode directly to the hitching rack and dismounted. He was crossing the veranda when the front door opened and he found himself looking at a kindly-faced little woman with a coffee pot in her hand.

Jeff doffed his hat. "Good mornin', ma'am. Reckon you're Mrs. Brent."

"Yes. Won't you come in?"

Jeff hesitated. "I'm Jeff Revere, foreman of the K-Bar. How is Mr. Brent?"

"He's doin' right well, thank you," she told him, and Jeff noticed with some surprise that there was no trace of animosity in her voice or actions.

"Can he talk business?"

"Yes. Come in, Mr. Revere."

Somewhat abashed, Jeff followed her into the room. Brent was lying on a couch, and the glare in his eyes was foreboding.

"Pa," said Mrs. Brent, "this is Mr. Revere. Set down, Mr. Revere."

"What do you want?" growled Brent.

"I've come with a peace pipe," said Jeff.

"There can be no peace with K-Bar steers on my range."

"There can if you will be reasonable. Mr. Brent, I'm authorized to offer you the present market value in cash for your cattle. We'll accept your count."

George Brent tried to rise, groaned, and sank back on the couch. For a long minute he lay there glaring, and his face, which had gone white with pain, gradually assumed the ruddy glow of anger.

"Young man, you listen to me. You say Kruger wants to buy; I say he lies! He don't want to buy; he wants to get my range like he got the Johnson and the Spear spreads—for next to nothin'."

"You heard the offer he authorized me to make."

"He authorized you to make it knowin' I'd refuse! If I accepted, he'd find a way to hedge. I know him. I was runnin' cattle here before his K-Bar was even thought of. So was Johnson, and so was Spear.

He tricked them. Had the bank lend them money, then bought up their notes and foreclosed. That's the kind of jigger yo're workin' for.

"Foreman of the K-Bar! Hell, you ain't nothin' but a tool! I wouldn't sell to him if my cows were standin' with their tongues out, and we was starvin' with them! Not to Amos Kruger, by jack!"

Jeff was genuinely disturbed. "Why don't you call his bluff by acceptin' the offer?"

"Because I know the man. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of thinkin' he'd fooled me even for a minute. He's a cross between a sneaky coyote and a poison rattler. By jack, I'll—"

He broke off to stare toward the doorway, and Jeff, turning his head, saw Nancy Brent standing there.

Her boots, overalls, and flannel shirt were soiled and muddy; the old Stetson which she wore showed many finger prints; a smudge of dirt extended across one velvety cheek. Jeff guessed, correctly, that she had been cleaning out water holes. For a moment she stared at him, then her dark eyes flamed with anger and she strode determinedly toward him.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded brusquely.

Jeff got to his feet. "Came to see yo're father on business."

"You certainly have gall. If you want to gloat, you might pick a time when my father is not helpless."

"Nancy!" rebuked her mother sharply.

"I don't care!" declared the girl. "He's stolen our range and kept our stock from water and even shot dad, and he has the nerve to come to our very house. I wish I had my quirt!"

"I didn't shoot your father, Miss Nancy."

"You did. You are a professional gunman or you wouldn't have the name you bear. Flash Revere! Why, it was too raw even for your own men. That Lane fellow knew you did it, and he quit on the spot."

"Lane didn't quit because he thought I shot yo're father."

"Oh, stop lying! I don't want to argue with you. Get out of this house and start riding!"

"Nancy!" Mrs. Brent was on her feet now, and her face was stern. "I reckon yo're forgettin' yo're manners, child. Mr. Revere came here on a peaceful errand and you got no call to insult him. Land sakes! Haven't you learned how to treat guests? Now you trot off to yo're room and get out of them dirty rags. I'll have dinner presently. Mr. Revere, you come with me."

Nancy, after a final glare at Jeff, turned and walked from the room. Jeff spoke apologetically. "Reckon I'd better be ridin', Mrs. Brent."

"You come with me. Reckon you ain't had your dinner yet, and we won't let you go hungry. Pa won't sell to Kruger. I wouldn't let him even if you talked him into it. You come with me."

Jeff reluctantly followed her into the kitchen. She made him sit down at the table, filled his plate, and poured coffee from the pot which she had carried into the room with her.

"Now go right ahead and eat. I want to talk with you. Goodness knows I've no quarrel with you; you were hired to do a job, and you're tryin' your best to do it. Reckon you can only see Kruger's side of it. I want to show you ours. I wonder if you know where the 71 got its brand?"

"Miss Nancy said the ranch was founded in eighteen-seventy-one."

"That's right. George was a man of yo're age and I was about Nancy's. We came out here in a wagon train—the Spears, the Johnsons, and the Brents. My name was Johnson—Mary Johnson. We fought most every inch of the way. Indians and road-agents and horse thieves. I loaded rifles for our men folks. My mother

was shot through with an arrow and died in my arms. One of my brothers was tortured and killed by Indians. George lost his father. One of the Spear boys was crippled for life."

"That sure was tough," murmurred Jeff.

"They were pioneer days," said the old lady grimly. "We were lookin' for homes, and we expected to pay. Only we didn't pay with money, we paid with hardship and sufferin' and blood. My folks settled at the lower end of the valley, the Spears took the upper end, and George found this pocket.

"Right now yo're sittin' in the cabin that he and his brothers built. Later, when his brothers drifted on farther west and George and me were married, he built the rest of the house." She glanced at Jeff over her spectacles. "There's nothin' fancy about it, but it's our home."

Jeff nodded soberly, his eyes on his plate.

"Every piece of timber in it, every spike that was driven, every notch cut in a log, cost us somethin'. You will find bullet holes in the walls. In the back the logs are scorched where the Indians built a fire against the house. George was wounded when he ran out and kicked the embers away. Sufferin', hardship, and blood paid for our home, and now Amos Kruger wants to take it from us."

Jeff was deeply moved. "Ma'am, yo're makin' it mighty tough for me."

"I'm not tryin' to," she answered gently. "I told you so that you would understand why we're stubborn and maybe invitin' trouble with Kruger. It ain't a question of a few acres of ground and a couple thousand steers. This is our home. More coffee? No? Land sakes! You ain't through already?"

"I've had plenty," said Jeff. "I shore thank you for the feed, Mrs. Brent."

"That's all right. It costs so little to treat folks right that sometimes a body wonders why there are so many mean people in the world. Now if you don't want to start George off again, you just slip out this kitchen door. I'm right glad you came, and when this trouble is over you drop in again."

She nodded brightly to him, and Jeff, murmuring a goodbye stepped through the doorway. Nancy was standing by his horse waiting for him. She had changed to the riding clothes he had first seen her wearing, and Jeff felt an odd thrill as he took in the beauty and grace of her.

The Six-Gun Hireling Of A Sidewinder Turns Robin Hood Of The Range

She eyed him resentfully as he halted before her. "I suppose you've been soft-soaping ma to try to get her on your side," she accused.

"No'm, I haven't. Yo're ma's all wool and a yard wide. Yo're from the same bolt of goods, but you shore were cut on a bias. For one thing, I didn't shoot yo're father. For another, I'm not a killer—for pleasure or for hire."

"So you say!" she gibed. "With a name like Flash!"

"That name was wished on me."

"No doubt. Gunmen don't pick their nicknames, they earn them."

"It was given me because I happen to be fast on the draw. I don't like it, and men don't use it to my face."

"Kruger does."

"He's my boss. Besides, he's like you: he don't know any better."

Her face was flaming. "I think you're the most insulting—"

"Think what you like," he interrupted her tartly. "But there is one thing I want to set you right on. Weary Lane didn't

quit because he thought I shot your father, he quit because he decided that you folks were gettin' a rotten deal. Don't take your hate out on him. He'd give his life for you any minute of the day, three hundred and sixty-five days to the year."

Her eyes went wide. "What are you telling me?"

"What Lane himself would never tell you. He worships the ground you walk on."

"Mr. Revere, are you loco?"

"Not so's you'd notice it. I'm simply tryin' to set you right about a man who loves you with the whole big heart of him. Weary Lane is as honest and square as they make them. He no longer works for Kruger, and right now he's tryin' to round up the man who shot your dad. The least he deserves is yore kindness. Goodbye, ma'am."

He stepped into the saddle and rode away, leaving Nancy Brent, for once in her tempestuous life, without a fitting answer.

SIX-GUN SHOWDOWN

Jeff rode directly to Hondo. Mrs. Brent's story had impressed him greatly, and the doubt which Weary's deflection had aroused was intensified by Brent's denunciation of Amos Kruger. It was for the purpose of quizzing his boss that Jeff rode to town.

He had intended going immediately to the bank building, but Weary Lane halted him a full block from the place.

"Come into this saloon with me, Jeff," he said.

Revere dismounted and followed him inside. "What's on yore mind, cowboy?"

"Red Huggins is in town."

"That's good."

"In a way it is, but I didn't want you to walk upon him suddenlike. He has four other hombres with him—bad eggs, all of them. Jeff, they'll pitch into you without excuse if you start to work on Huggins."

Jeff nodded shortly. "I'll take care of Huggins when the time comes. Right now I aim to talk with Kruger."

"That's what I figgered. They're in Kruger's office now."

"Well, I'll be seein' you." Jeff started for the door.

"Wait a minute. You goin' up there now?"

"Yes."

"Reckon I'll amble along."

Jeff turned swiftly to him. "Weary, you keep out of this."

"Sure. I just crave some fresh air." He walked from the saloon with Jeff, watched him mount and rein away, then started along the sidewalk.

When Jeff entered the bank building he found the door to Kruger's office closed. He spoke to a clerk. "Mr. Kruger in?"

"He's busy right now, Mr. Revere. I'll tell him you are here." He rapped on the office door, then opened it and thrust his head inside.

Kruger came out, closed the door carefully behind him, and motioned Jeff to enter the adjoining office. "How did you make out?" he asked.

Jeff dropped into a chair which commanded a view of the door. "He wouldn't sell."

Kruger expressed no surprise. "Then we'll have to throw the hooks into him. Order wire and set your men to cutting posts. String a fence across the mouth of that gap."

Jeff was casual. "Reckon you knew he wouldn't sell."

Kruger laughed shortly. "Of course; but I had to make the offer so that we would be in the clear for the next move."

"Suppose he had taken you up?"

Kruger waved his hand carelessly. "There is always a way out of an oral agreement. I didn't make the offer myself; I could have claimed that you exceeded your authority." He grinned wolfishly.

"I see. Then you never intended to buy."

"Do I look like a simpleton? Why should I, when I can get his stuff later for a song? The man must be smashed."

Jeff was looking at the end of his cigarette, and his eyes were veiled. His voice was quite steady. "The Johnson and Spear spreads—how did you manage them?"

"Easy, my boy, easy. The bank president was under obligations to me. He encouraged them to make costly improvements with money which he lent them on short term notes. Promised them they could renew as often as they liked. I bought the notes, and when they matured, foreclosed. The president went on a long vacation, and they had no comeback. Their understanding with him was an oral agreement, you know."

"I see. A man-to-man proposition."

"Yes. It had no standing at law."

Jeff's voice was still gentle. "And your promise to make me foreman—a member of your cattle company—that's one of them oral agreements, too."

Kruger spoke hastily. "Oh, that's different! I'd keep my word there. Now you get busy on that fence."

Jeff got to his feet, walked over to the desk, then leaned over it and slapped Kruger smartly on the cheek. Kruger shrank with pain and surprise.

"Why, you crazy loon! What are you doing? I'll have you arrested!"

"You can't," said Jeff smoothly. "It was a man-to-man proposition; no standin' at law! Kruger, when I took this job I thought you were a white man. You're not my kind of folks. You're a low-down range hog and crook, and I'm quittin' right now."

Kruger was still nursing his cheek. "I might have known you didn't have the guts to go through with it."

"You're wrong. I *am* goin' through with it. Good mornin'."

"Just a moment!" Kruger sprang to his feet. His eyes were glinting and he was trembling with anger. "You throw in with Brent and I'll crush you with him. Your successor is in the next room, and he isn't very friendly toward you. I think I can depend upon him to take care of you."

"I'm not throwin' in with Brent. He wouldn't have me, and I don't blame him. But I aim some way to block your dirty plans, and if Red Huggins or any other of your paid killers try to stop me, it will be just too bad for them."

"We'll see about that right now!" Kruger's voice rose to a scream. "Huggins! Come running! Huggins! Help!"

Jeff heard a sudden shuffle of feet and a muffled shout, "Comin', boss!" He leaped to a place behind Kruger just as Huggins and his men, guns in hand, appeared in the doorway. Jeff flung his left arm about Kruger's middle, and the muzzle of his .44 smacked against the thin man's spine with a force that made him squeal.

"If those guns ain't leathered in about three seconds," said Jeff viciously, "I blow yo're backbone clear through yo're belly!"

"It—it's all right, boys!" said Kruger hoarsely. "P-put up your weapons. You hear me? Put them up!"

A voice sounded outside the door. "And keep them there." Weary Lane craned his neck to peer over their heads. "What's up, Jeff?"

"Just a difference of opinion. Herd them skunks into the room with the big boss polecat. That's right. Now take up the collection."

Weary proceeded to disarm the five. A safe stood in the corner with its door slightly ajar, and into this Weary tossed the weapons, closing the door and whirling the combination dial. "What next?" he asked eagerly.

"Mr. Kruger is goin' to escort us to the door," said Jeff. "Forward march, Amos; and remember that yore backbone is still in danger."

Kruger led the way from the office. At the door, Jeff called a halt. "Me and Amos will wait here while you get the horses," he told Weary.

Lane nodded and ran down the street. Presently he returned, mounted, and, leaning from his saddle, gathered the reins of Jeff's buckskin into his hands. "All set, cowboy."

Jeff sheathed his six-gun, ran to the hitching rack, and sprang into his saddle. "Let's go," he said, and the two spurred their mounts down the street.

A stout man with a nickled star on his vest came running to where Kruger stood, cursing. "What's up?" he panted.

"Attempted holdup!" snapped the lean man. "A hell of a sheriff you are! Where were you, anyhow?"

The officer's red face grew even ruddier. "Come as quick—as I could. They get anything?"

"No," admitted Kruger reluctantly. "But they might have."

"What the hell—you kickin' about then?" gasped the sheriff, and turned away. "Danged coyote," he grumbled to himself. "Talkin' to me that away—after me runnin'—my danged legs off!"

It was a little thing, this affront to the dignity of the sheriff, but it was bigger than Amos Kruger thought.

NAME ON A BULLET

Several miles out of town, the two cowboys reined in their horses to roll the inevitable cigarette.

"What's next?" inquired Weary.

"The next thing is to undo what we've done and fix it so that Brent gets his range back and keeps it."

Weary whistled. "Not much of a job—for Moses or Jeremiah or a few other miracle workers. As it is, I reckon you'll have to do the leadin' out of the wilderness. How do we start, Mr. Moses?"

"You'll see," said Jeff, setting spurs to his horse.

They reached the K-Bar to find the house deserted except for the Chinaman. At Jeff's command he packed some food for them. Jeff got his war-bag and made up one for Weary, who had left his own in Hondo.

In the saddle again, they rode directly to the camp in the cottonwoods. To the consternation of the cook and his helpers, Jeff ordered them to strike camp and drive back to K-Bar headquarters; then, Weary beside him, he rode out on the range where his men were still busy turning back thirsty 71 cattle.

"All right, boys," he said. "Bunch up the K-Bars and drive them across the creek. Change in plans. Let the 71 stock drift back to water. Hurry it up, and get your suppers back at the mess shack."

Wonderingly they obeyed. Revere and Weary helped them get started, then when the work was well under way and a steady stream of 71 steers were trotting toward the creek, they drew rein and watched with sober faces.

"Well, Moses," said Weary, "you've made a good start. But Kruger will send Huggins to drive them back."

"Sure," agreed Jeff. "But Brent's cows get a drink."

"We'd better head for the hills," suggested Weary. "They'll be huntin' for us with murder in their hearts before mornin'."

They turned toward the gap to see two riders approaching. "Miss Nancy and Jack Summers," announced Jeff.

The two parties continued their course until but twenty feet separated then reined in and sat for a moment regarding each other.

"What are you doing now?" demanded Nancy.

Jeff touched his hat. "We're un-doin', ma'am. I've ordered all K-Bar stock off yo're range."

"There's a catch to it somewhere," said the girl bitterly.

"Jeff quit the cattle company," Weary told them.

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"It's true."

"If it is," said Jack Summers, "I'll be a rip-snortin' son of a lop-eared rhinoceros if it ain't the best news I've heerd since the surrender of Cornwallis."

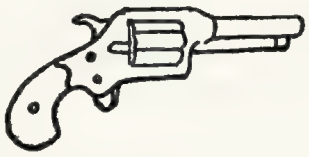
Jeff grinned. "So you were at Yorktown! You don't look yore age."

"Them histories have it all wrong," Summers continued gravely. "They show a picture of Cornwallis handin' his sword to George Washin'ton. Well, it didn't happen thataway. Cornwallis—"

"Sorry we can't stay to hear about it," interrupted Jeff hastily, "but Weary and me are right anxious to find a hill—a big one with lots of brush. When Kruger finds what I ordered his men to do, he's apt to be riled."

"I know the very place," declared Summers. "If Miss Nancy will excuse me, I'd shore admire to lead you to it."

Nancy Brent for the first time found herself wavering. Something urged her to believe this tall cowboy who could smile so boyishly. Yet she was familiar with Kruger's underhand methods, and for all she knew this show of friendship might be for the purpose of putting her off guard.



"You can go," she told Summers somewhat reluctantly. "But it sounds haywire to me. I can't imagine how any man who has been so enthusiastic about the Kruger Cattle Company could have changed so completely."

"It hits a fella suddenlike, like religion," Jeff told her gravely. "Well, we'll be driftin'. So long, ma'am."

The three turned away, but before Jeff had fairly started Nancy spurred her pony to his side and gripped him by an arm. "Jeff Revere, if you're tricking me—!"

He looked down into the blazing eyes. "Ma'am, I wouldn't trick you. I reckon Amos Kruger is everything you believe him to be. Anyhow, I spoke my piece and quit. I ordered the K-Bar stuff off yore range before the men could learn that I am no longer boss. I've thrown in with Weary, and we're goin' to get yore range back for you. You see," he added whimsically, "I told you what a fine fellow Weary is; I got to help him beat Kruger to prove it to you."

The violet eyes were troubled. "I'd like to believe you," Nancy told him, "but I'm afraid. I know Amos Kruger. He always works under cover. If I discover that—that I have misjudged you, I don't think there could be anything—that would make me—happier."

The admission came haltingly, and as Jeff looked into her face he saw that her cheeks were flushed.

"I aim to show you that you have misjudged me," he said quietly, then wheeled his horse and spurred away.

Some time later the three drew up in a grassy glade far up on the mountain side. "Here we are," said Summers. "Good grass and water, and hid away as snug as a grass-widder's weddin' ring. You dudes take care of the stock and I'll rustle some grub. Use to be pussonal cook to Napoleon Bonypart. I remember when we was crossin' the Ozarks—" The rest was lost as he disappeared among the trees in search of firewood.

That night Jeff lay for many hours staring up at the stars, wrestling with the biggest problem he had ever been called upon to face. In some way he must restore Brent's range. With the aid of but Weary

and old Jack Summers he must accomplish that which Brent and all his resources had been unable to do. It was a colossal task, but Jeff tackled it with the confidence of youth and the newly fired determination to right the wrong he had done.

The hours passed. Cigarette after cigarette glowed dully, burned to stubs, were pinched out and replaced by others. Force was out of the question; some way must be found to outwit Kruger, to checkmate this land grabber completely and effectually.

But how? It was a case, not of selecting the best of a number of plans, but of finding just one which promised some chance of success. And whatever was done must be done at once. Another day would see K-Bar stock back on 71 range, filtering into the gap, slowly forcing Brent to the half section he had homesteaded and which, of course, Kruger could not usurp.

Jeff felt a little prickle of excitement. The cigarette was arrested on its way to his lips, and for a long minute he lay staring. He sat up suddenly.

"Fellows, I got it!"

The two figures by the dying campfire stirred sleepily.

"I got it, I tell you!" Jeff was on his feet now, kicking the fire together. "Wake up, you slumber hounds; I tell you I got it!"

"Yeah, and you got it bad," complained Weary.

Jack Summers rolled over and dragged a bandanna-wrapped plug from his pocket. "Tobaccy's good for the toothache; take a chaw," he invited.

"It's not my toothache, it's Kruger's," grinned Jeff. "Sit up and listen to me. I tell you I've found the way to keep K-Bar cattle off Brent's spread, now and forever more, amen!"

They saw the eager light of inspiration in his eyes and sat up promptly.

"That gap is two miles wide, aint it?" he asked.

"Shore is," confirmed Weary.

"And the fences runnin' from the mouth of the gap to the creek are each a mile long."

"That's right."

"Then we're all set! It will mean work, and we'll need money."

"I got thirty-two dollars left," said Weary.

"I got six or seven," said Summers, forgetting to lie.

"Not enough. We'll need some big money. Maybe Jack can find some of Brent's friends who'll be willin' to kick in. We can't approach Brent; can't even let him know what we're doin' for him. He'll think we're workin' against him, in fact."

"My gosh!" complained Summers. "You got me as nervous as a chicken watchin' a hawk. Ain't you never goin' to tell us?"

"Sure." Jeff squatted on his heels and with a stick scraped a bit of ground clear. "Here's the gap and here's the creek," he told them; and for several minutes thereafter was busy drawing lines and making explanations. They listened in silence, but their eyes grew brighter as he progressed, and when he had finally finished, Jack Summers took a bite from his plug and spat copiously.

"I'll be a cross-eyed son of a pidgeon-toed heifer if you ain't hit her," he affirmed enthusiastically. "Yes, sir; I'll be a pug-nosed son of a white-haired elephant if you ain't!"

BUZZARD'S WINGS CLIPPED

A half mile beyond the river, on what had been 71 spread, two men were hard at work. Weary Lane was engaged in riding to the creek, roping one by one the logs which had been felled there, and dragging them to where Jeff was cutting notches and jockeying the heavy timbers in place.

Three days had passed since the conception of Jeff's plan, and in the interval Revere and his companions had paid a business visit to the county seat. Now, with the eager anticipation of school boys about to watch the teacher seat himself on a tack, they were looking forward to Kruger's consternation when he discovered how completely his aims had been frustrated.

Weary freed his rope and squinted toward the north, where Huggins and the K-Bar crew were busy stringing fence across the gap.

"The investigatin' committee is arrivin'," he announced.

Revere dropped his axe and mopped his face with a bandanna. "Let 'em come," he said grimly. "Kruger is about due for that toothache."

There were five horsemen in the party, and presently Jeff recognized Red Huggins and his rascally four. They drew rein, scowling, suspicious, evidently expecting a fight. "What are you doin' here?" demanded Red.

"Buildin' a cabin," answered Jeff calmly.

"What in hell for?"

"To live in."

"Yeah? Well, git off this land. The K-Bar ain't standin' for no squatters. Git off, or git put off."

Revere grinned. "You cain't put a man off his own property. This land is mine."

Red stared at him. "Yours? Are you loco?"

"No; I'm wise as hell! I've homesteaded on this land."

"Homesteaded! It's a bluff. You've no more homesteaded than I have."

Jeff withdrew a packet of papers from his pocket and reached for a rolled plat. "Got the papers to show for it. Want to see them?"

"Naw! Show 'em to Kruger. Come on, boys." He headed for Hondo.

The walls of the cabin had risen several feet when Kruger arrived. He came in a buckboard, and beside the vehicle rode Red Huggins and his four. The party drew rein a short distance away, and one of the men held the team while Kruger dismounted and strode towards Revere.

Jeff leaned against the logs and waited. Weary, eager for the fun, came up from the creek. Both had expected Kruger to fume and threaten; to their surprise he did not seem even dismayed. Instead, there was a gleam of sardonic humor in his glinting eyes, and for a moment Revere was puzzled.

Kruger gazed about him interestedly. His voice was mocking. "So you've turned honest son of toil, eh? May I ask where your homestead is located?"

"There is no secret about it. I filed on a half section fronting on the creek, beginnin' at a point a half mile from the east fence and runnin' to within a half mile of the west fence. Here is the plat showin' my holdin's."

Kruger studied the map. "Who put you up to this—Brent?

"Why, Mr. Kruger! That would be collusion. We could never get our patents if somebody was backin' us for his own benefit."

Kruger was smiling a crooked smile as he returned the plat. "Too bad the law permits you to file on only a half section, otherwise you might have settled on the land along each fence also, thereby cutting me off from 71 range altogether.

"As it is, when Huggins brought me word of your homesteading, two of my men overheard our conversation and immediately were seized with a longing to become land owners. I believe they intend filing along the east and west fences, and, being friends of mine, will allow my cattle to pass."

Jeff grinned. "If they had talked with me first I could have saved them a long ride. The land along the fences is already filed on."

"What?" Kruger's face lost its complacent expression. "What do you mean it's filed on? Who filed on it?"

"Weary Lane and Jack Summers. Of course, if your friends are set on homesteadin' they can file on the other side of the fences. The range is good."

Kruger, for the moment, lost all semblance of self control. "Why, you damned interfering young fool, I'll fix you if it's the last thing I do!"

"While you're plannin' the fixin', just remember that any attempt on yore part to interfere with my homestead will have to be explained to a United States Marshal."

"We can even call out the cav'lry," reminded Weary solemnly. "Yes, sir; we're gentlemen of influence and power now. Why, we might grow to be as great as the Kruger Cattle Company some day."

Kruger stood glaring, struggling with his anger and finally mastering it.

"You win for the time being, Revere; but the game isn't over. If Brent is behind this the government will never grant your patents."

With a curt command to Huggins he climbed into the buckboard and drove away. Red and his men followed at a canter.

Weary was chuckling. "I wouldn't 'a' missed it for anything. Ain't he the fox, though? Soon as Red reported yore homesteadin', he sent men to file on the fences. A two-day ride for nothin'. Boy, what a toothache!"

They were putting the finishing touches on the cabin when Jack Summers rode up. Dismounting he began turning out his pockets, dumping their contents into his tattered Stetson.

"There she is, boys. Danged near a million dollars. I went the rounds of Hondo. Put it right up to them and never even mentioned Brent's name. Told them how Amos Kruger had roped in a trustin' young cowboy to do his dirty work, and how, when that honest young puncher found out he was bein' used as a tool, he took an oath on the tomb of his grandpa to square things by keepin' Kruger from hoggin' more range.

"Told 'em that me and Lane had throwed in with him, me bein' a kind-hearted, truth-lovin' old man, and Weary not havin' much sense nohow. They ain't one of them that wouldn't swear we was homesteadin' on our own hook."

"How much did you get?" asked Weary.

"Oh, a couple thousand dollars."

"Not quite," corrected Jeff, who had made a hasty count. "But you done noble just the same. There's close to nine hundred dollars in the pool."

Jack grinned his satisfaction. "I'll throw some grub together. Shore am hungry. Say, it looks like we're gonna have company."

A buckboard and a mounted man were nearing the cabin.

"The toothache comin' back," groaned Weary.

"Bringin' the sheriff with him," added Jack. "Now what does he want?"

The buckboard stopped and Kruger sprang to the ground. The sheriff dismounted and approached them a bit reluctantly.

"Revere," said the officer, "Kruger swore out a warrant chargin' you with theft. Says you stole some K-Bar property in the form of beddin' and food to the amount of thirty-two dollars and sixty cents."

Weary groaned. "It's that pack he made up for me," he whispered to Jack.

Jeff did not seem disturbed. "Thirty-two dollars and sixty cents, huh? Well, that still leaves him owin' me seven dollars and forty cents. I have an order in my pocket for a month's wages on Kruger's Circle-K." He produced the paper and handed it to the sheriff.

The officer wheeled on Kruger. "Why in hell didn't you tell me this?"

"I—I didn't know. But that makes no difference. He stole that property just the same and I demand that you arrest him."

The sheriff crammed the warrant back into his pocket. "Do you think I'm fool enough to make myself the laughin' stock of Hondo? If I had known about that order I'd of never come out here in the first place."

"While you are here, sheriff," said Jeff calmly, "I'll serve notice on Mr. Kruger to move his K-Bar stock from my range."

"Sheriff, this is a frame-up!" cried Kruger hotly. "Brent put him up to this. A blind man could see it."

"We'll find out about that," said the officer. "Here comes George now."

Absorbed in their argument with Kruger, the three had not noticed Brent's approach. Now they turned to see not only the owner of the 71 but his daughter as well. Brent, still tightly bandaged, climbed stiffly from his saddle and advanced toward them. Nancy sat her horse in silence, watching.

"What's this cabin doin' here?" demanded Brent harshly.

Jeff answered. "I've homesteaded this half section. Lane has taken the half section along the east fence, and Summers has filed on the west fence."

"Homesteaded! Why, damn it! You've cut me off from water!"

"Reckon that's so," said Jeff stonily. He kept his eyes from the face of Nancy, but he knew she was hating him more in that moment than she had ever hated him before. Nevertheless, he must stick to his course; Kruger must be given no opportunity to prove collusion between them and Brent.

"It's an outrage!" cried Brent bitterly. "Another of Kruger's low-down tricks. But by jack! I'll fight you in the courts. He's backin' you."

"Easy, George," warned the sheriff. "Amos has just accused the boys of bein' in cahoots with you. They are actin' accordin' to law, and as long as they make their improvements accordin' to law I aim to uphold them."

Brent stared at the officer, then the fire went out of his eyes and his shoulders sagged. "You, too, huh?" he said dully.

The sheriff reddened. "Reckon you know yo're wrong, George. I'm just backin' these boys as long as they play square."

Nancy rode forward and touched her father on the shoulder. "Come on, Dad; we're licked—thanks to Flash Revere." She flashed Jeff one glance of scorn and abhorrence and walked her horse away.

"Well, that's that," said Weary; but his fingers trembled as he strove to roll a cigarette, and Jeff knew he was thinking of Nancy.

"Brent may be licked, but I'm not!" snapped Kruger.

The sheriff turned on him like a flash. "The hell you ain't! Kruger, you listen to me. I'm about sick of your high and mighty ways. You've grabbed land and money until you think you're just about king. Keep your threats to yourself. If you try to interfere with these men, I'll land on you so hard there won't be even a collar button left!"

Kruger glared at him for a moment, then turned and strode to his buckboard. The sheriff watched him drive away.

"Dam' buzzard," he muttered, then turned sharply to Summers. "Give me a chaw, Jack, and rustle that grub. I'm stayin' to supper."

SIDEWINDER PLOT

Jeff Revere was driving a spring wagon down the main street of Hondo. He had just left the hardware store, and in the bed of the wagon were reels of wire, staples, stretchers, and post-hole diggers. Kruger had not withdrawn his cattle, and only by stringing an impregnable barrier of wire around the three homesteads would they be able to keep his cows from water.

He was passing the bank when a man came through the doorway, calling to him to stop. "Mr. Kruger would like to speak to you, Mr. Revere," the fellow said.

Jeff pulled over to the hitching rail and tied the team, then walked into the building where Kruger was waiting for him.

He followed Kruger into the office. The lean man closed the door, waved Jeff into a chair, and seated himself at his desk. "I see you are going to fence," he said.

"Yes." Jeff tilted his chair back and rolled a cigarette. "I warned you to remove your stock. You haven't done it. We're fencin' for our own protection. The K-Bar has plenty of range and water of its own."

Kruger smiled grimly. "I'm not so dense but that I can see your object. You aim to put yourself in such a position that Brent and myself will have to bid against each other for access to the creek. Well, I'll put in my bid now. Revere, if you and your two friends move out of the country and abandon these homestead sites, I'll pay each of you a thousand dollars."

"In other words," said Jeff, "you'll pay three thousand dollars to put Brent out of business."

"I'm not talking about Brent. The K-Bar must expand. To do so we must have access to the water on your side of the creek. I'm offering you and your friends a thousand each in order to get that water."

"You don't need all three claims," said Jeff. "My holdings extend for a mile along the creek. That would be enough."

"Quite right," agreed Kruger promptly. "I'll amend that offer. I'll pay you the three thousand dollars if you give up your claim."

"That sort of lets Lane and Summers out of the deal, doesn't it?"

Kruger's eyes narrowed. "What do you care? They're nothing to you. I'll pay you the money and you simply drop out of sight. Three thousand dollars is a lot of money, my boy."

Jeff got to his feet. "I told you once that you weren't my kind of folks, Kruger. Do I have to slap you on the other side of your face to drive that fact home?" Kruger was about to speak, but Jeff went on quickly. "Don't say anything, or I'll lose my temper and give you a good workin' over on general principles."

He nodded shortly, flashed the man a look of utter disgust, and strode from the room. Kruger, face purple, glared for a long minute at the door Jeff had closed behind him, then gradually his features lost their rigidity and he grinned wolfishly. He got up, opened the door, and summoned a clerk.

"Find Huggins and send him to me," he ordered.

Ten minutes later, Red Huggins rapped on the door and was admitted. Kruger waved him to a chair and pushed a box of cigars across the desk. "Huggins," he said, "I gather that you don't have much liking for this Revere."

Cattle Will Swallow Hot Lead For Water If Driven Through The Barbed-Wire!

The eyes of the gunman flared momentarily. "Keep talkin'," he said.

"I don't like him myself," Kruger went on. "Unfortunately, my hands are tied. If anything happens to him, this fathead of a sheriff will pin it on me if he can. I offered to buy him out, and he refused to listen to me. Somehow I must get him off that land."

"I told you long ago to let me handle it."

"I couldn't while you were working for me. Now listen. Revere is going to build fence. When he is finished, I want you to

withdraw our stock. When you've done that, I'll fire you."

Red's jaw dropped. "You'll what?"

"Fire you. You will naturally be very angry with me, and anything that you do then will not implicate me. Surely you have some imagination, Red."

Huggins scowled at him for a moment. "Yeah, I ain't so dumb; but what's in it for me?"

Kruger fumbled with some papers on his desk. "The Kruger Cattle Company owns a number of outfits. Up north we have a nice spread which runs a Box-K brand. It needs a foreman, and I think you would fit right into the scheme of things. Good money, a job with a future, and an interest in the company."

Red's eyes were gleaming. "I got you. And my buddies?"

Kruger shrugged. "That's up to you. You keep the reward yourself, or share with them as you like."

"Huh! They don't mean nothin' to me." Red drew a deep breath and hitched his guns into a more comfortable position. "Leave it to me, boss."

Kruger's voice was almost a purr. "Not entirely, Huggins. I have no doubt of your ability, but an idea has occurred to me, a —or—method of procedure which will enable us to dispose of two birds with one stone."

Red gazed at him in frowning puzzlement. Kruger went on:

"Brent and Revere are enemies; if not in fact, at least they have led the world to believe so. Now if both of them were to be found dead in such positions as would give the impression that they had done away with each other, we would both be rid of our enemies and no suspicion would be attached to either of us."

Red's eyes were burning now, and the skin about his mouth was white under its stubble. Huggins was by no means a master mind, but he did possess an acute animal cunning. Kruger's plan appealed to him, and he nodded grimly.

"I gotcha, boss. Two birds with one stone it is."

That afternoon saw the beginning of a string of fence which, when completed, would shut 71 range from the creek. Four days later it was practically finished. Brent and his daughter rode up in time to witness the concluding act in the drama which they felt sure was to spell the doom of the 71. They sat their horses in silence, watching, the girl's face strained and white, that of Brent doggedly grim.

Jeff was preparing to close the last gap when Red Huggins rode up at the head of his crew. He spoke gruffly. "Hold up on that wire, Revere. We aim to gather the K-Bar stock and drive 'em back on our range."

Jeff nodded. "It is something that should have been done long ago. We'll hold off until tomorrow."

At a signal from Huggins the K-Bar men wheeled their horses and rode toward the gap to begin their work. Red, scenting trouble, remained where he was.

Brent and Nancy had ridden near enough to hear the conversation; now the owner of the 71 spurred forward until but three feet separated him from Revere.

"I've just one thing to say to you, Revere. Kruger tried to ruin me, but dirty as he is he made it a man-to-man proposition. You've hid behind the skirts of the gover'ment, and with yore two pet sidewinders backin' your play I can't drop you in your tracks like I want to. But from now on I'm ridin' your trail, and the first time we meet alone it will be you or me! Understand? Next time you see me, yank your gun and go to shootin', for I'll pot you like I would a mangy polecat"

"No! No!" Nancy jumped her horse beside that of her father and seized his arm. "No, Dad! You're playing right

into his hands. He's a gunman—a killer. Dad, you mustn't!"

Brent ignored her warning. "I've said my say. Gunman or no gunman, it's him or me the next time we meet." Abruptly he reined his horse about and rode away.

Nancy followed, but for one instant she turned her face toward Jeff, and in her eyes he could read both hate and despair. It was as though she were looking upon her father's executioner.

Huggins had been listening avidly, and at the conclusion of Brent's ultimatum his ugly features were twisted in a grin of delight. Now he broke into a raucous laugh. "Haw, haw, haw! Reckon he got you told, Mister Flash Revere! And if he don't kill you, that li'l' hellcat of a daughter will!"

It was partly the use of his forbidden nickname, partly the epithet Huggins applied to Nancy, partly the blind rage at the injustice of the whole thing that seized Revere and for a few minutes converted him into a raging unreasoning beast.

Huggins had no warning of his intentions as Jeff spurred his horse, leaped him in one startled jump over the distance which separated them, and hurled himself from the saddle. Before the startled Huggins could make a defensive move Jeff had him by the throat and was dragging him to the ground. With two vicious jerks he tore the guns from Red's holsters and sent them flying.

Then, with a cold, methodical savagery, he proceeded to beat Huggins to a pulp. Not until the man was helpless and whimpering did he step away and brush a shaking hand across his eyes.

"Get out," he ordered hoarsely. "Get out of my sight and stay out. Now." And Huggins, bruised, gasping, scared half out of his wits, somehow managed to drag himself into the saddle and go.

Some time later Huggins limped into Kruger's office and slumped into a chair. His cheeks were bruised, his lips swollen, and one eye was closed. With a voice that shook with rage and humiliation and in words that were mostly blasphemous, he acquainted Kruger with what had happened.

"Fine!" said Kruger at the end of the recital. "Couldn't be better. One kills the other, and you finish off the survivor."

"Like hell!" growled Red. "I'm not takin' no chances of Brent killin' Revere! By hell, it's my slugs that are gonna bore into his guts!"

Kruger smiled faintly. "Better not risk it. If he did this to you with his bare hands, what would he do with a gun?"

"He won't git the chance!" blazed Red. "I'll dry-gulch the son!"

Kruger nodded approvingly. "Now you're talking sense." He reached for a sheet of paper and a pencil, thought for a moment, then wrote carefully. "Get a boy to deliver this to Revere," he said. "Somebody you can trust."

Red took the paper and spelled out the words. It read:

> Flash Revere—If you got half the guts of a coyote you'll meet me at ten tonight at the spring in the gap near the end of the fence Kruger started. Keep this to yourself and we will settle our fight between us with nobody to horn in.
>
> *George Brent.*

"You know the place, said Kruger. "There are trees around the spring. Hide there, and when Revere rides up, let him have it."

Huggins got to his feet. "I'll do it. I'll salivate him proper."

He stamped from the room and for a moment Kruger gazed thoughtfully after him. Then, seized with an inspiration, he reached for the paper and wrote another note. This he took out to the banking room and gave to a clerk.

"Deliver this to George Brent," he said. "It's important, and secret. If word of it leaks out, I'll know who to blame. And don't tell Brent who it is from."

The clerk nodded. "I understand. I'll see to it."

Amos Kruger returned to his office, closed and locked the door, and from a drawer withdrew a heavy revolver and carefully inspected it. The troubles of the Kruger Cattle Company would soon be over, he told himself. Revere would keep the appointment, and Brent, summoned by the same ruse, would meet him there. One of the two or both of them would be killed.

If Revere survived, Huggins would get him from ambush; if Brent were the victor, Kruger himself would settle his score with the 71 owner. In any event, both should die apparently at the hands of each other.

The troubles of the Kruger Cattle Company would soon be over! Thus Kruger congratulated himself.

JUSTICE GUNS

Jeff, after the thrashing of Huggins, swung into the saddle and rode, tight-lipped and silent, to his cabin. Weary Lane and Jack Summers gazed after him. Summers sighed deeply, bit off a huge chew of tobacco, and gave voice to his opinion.

"I'll never live to see the likes of it again. Jeff knocked him down, set him on his feet ag'in, and cuffed him cockeyed. It was the purtiest piece of maulin' I ever seed, and, son, I've witnessed some artistic workin' overs in my time."

"It was a beautiful sight," agreed Weary. "Huggins is one jackass that brayed at the wrong time. Them 'haw-haw's' was still tremblin' in his whiskers when Jeff lit on him. Well, Revere was sure entitled to a little revenge. He's had a bum deal all around. Brent's war talk set him on edge, and the hell of it is we can't tip George off without runnin' the risk of Kruger's accusin' us of bein' in cahoots with him."

When they returned to the cabin, Jeff was seated on the door step gazing somberly toward the creek. They dismounted and squatted on their heels beside him, talking brightly of everything but Brent's ultimatum. Revere spoke at last.

"By tonight the K-Bar cattle will be back on their own land. Tomorrow we'll make five or six gaps in my fence so that the 71 stock can get to water. Jack, you ride over to tell Brent about it, and make a deal whereby he pays us with stock for the privilege. We can't let him off too easy, or Kruger will get wise, and we can't charge Brent too much or he'll think we're tryin' to hold him up. Make him see that by homesteadin' we've shut off Kruger without hurtin' the 71."

"Sounds good to me," approved Weary eagerly. "He'll shore see the light—and Nancy, too."

Jeff nodded. "It will clear things up. And then, cowboy, your best bet is to put on that new pink shirt of yours and start courtin' Miss Nancy. She will most likely feel right sorry for the mean way she has been treatin' you. Best time in the world to get your loop on her."

He spoke lightly, but the smile lacked warmth. A queer wave of depression swept over him; he was dismayed to discover that the thought of Nancy giving her love to another aroused a feeling of resentment within him, even though that other was Weary Lane.

Weary got to his feet and his face was shining. "Shucks, Jeff, I ain't got a chance; but just the same I'll have a try. Reckon I'll mosey down to my shack and work on that roof. It ain't in no shape for a bride. So long, pardner." He walked whistling to his horse and rode jauntily away.

Jeff turned to Summers. "Listen, Jack. After you've made the deal with Brent I want you to talk with Miss Nancy. Tell her the whole story—how we planned to homestead to save her dad from Kruger—but give all the credit to Weary." Jack started to protest, but Jeff silenced him. "He's crazy in love with her, and she would be with him if she's given half a chance. Tell her it was Weary's idea all

the way through, but make her promise never mention it to him. You hear me?"

Jack was watching him shrewdly. "Yeah, I hear you. But—oh hell! What do you want to do that for? It was you that thought it out; it was—"

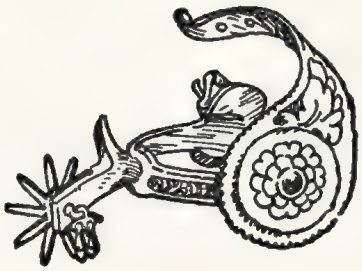
"I know," said Jeff impatiently. "The glory won't do me a bit of good, and it will help Weary a heap. I've nothin' to win; he has—everything."

"Uh-huh," agreed Summers doubtfully.

"And then you can tell her to slip over to the county seat and file on my half section. I'm leavin'. I'll notify the land office on my way out."

"Now I'll be a humped-back son of a ring-tailed wampus cat if I do!" declared Summers. "Ain't no use of your makin' a fool of yourself. This is good country. And besides, what would me 'n' Weary do without you?"

Jeff smiled one of his rare smiles. "Knowin' you two has been one of the brightest spots in my sin-ridden career, old-timer. But my mind is made up. You do as I say."



This, at the end of an hour's argument, Summers finally agreed to do. It went against the grain, but Jeff wished it so and put it in such a way that to refuse would be to deny that friendship Summers had professed. Jeff watched him lope toward the 71 ranch house, then mounted his own horse and headed for Hondo. He didn't feel like cooking; he'd get his supper in town.

A strange feeling of unrest had seized him. He wanted action of some kind; something to keep his mind off the girl whom he was now persuaded that he loved. Foolishly; without any hope of return.

He did not ride down the main street. Huggins, he knew, would be laying for him, and while he did not fear the encounter he had no desire to make a target of himself. He sought out the litter-strewn alley, heading toward the restaurant at the other end of Hondo. He was approaching the bank building when a man darted from the rear entrance. At sight of Jeff he halted abruptly, half turned as though to duck back into the building, then changed his mind and ran down the alley to the livery barn.

Jeff continued his way, half expecting a shot from the gloom within the stable. None came, and as he walked his horse past the rear entrance Jeff saw the liveryman saddling a rangy bay by the beams of a lantern.

Jeff dismounted behind the restaurant, tied his horse, and took a position at one corner of the shack where he could watch the livery barn. Presently the bay emerged bearing on his back the man from the bank. The animal broke into a trot, headed in the direction from which Jeff had come.

Revere walked along the alley to the bank. Something sinister was afoot, and it was but natural that he should connect it with Amos Kruger, who had his office in the building. Jeff moved a box into place beneath the window of Kruger's office, and, removing his hat, mounted it and peered through the dust-streaked glass. Kruger was seated at his desk cleaning a six-gun.

Jeff stepped carefully to the ground, squatted on his heels, and thoughtfully scratched his head. Amos Kruger had figured out a crooked play of some kind. Against whom? It could not be Jeff or the man would have warned Kruger of the cowboy's presence in the alley. To be sure that the fellow had not circled around and entered by the front door, Jeff walked to the street. The bay and its rider were not in sight.

Kruger's move, then, was not directed

toward him. Who else? Weary? Summers? Brent? Revere had not the slightest idea. His only hope of finding out lay in watching the wily K-Bar owner.

Jeff returned to his horse and, thought of supper gone, mounted and retraced his route to a point just outside the town limits. Here, in a little clump of trees, he prepared to wait. Dusk had fallen when a rider loped in from the direction of the valley ranches.

In the gloom Jeff could not distinguish the features of either horse or man, but since he was not particularly interested in travelers from that direction the failure to identify the rider did not worry him. Had he but known it, it was Jack Summers in search of him.

Fear that Kruger might slip past him in the dark impelled Jeff to return to the edge of town where the light which streamed from windows and open doorways would assist him. He had scarcely reached his station when a rider walked his horse from the shadows of the alley and turned toward the valley trail. Jeff had one brief glimpse of his profile, vague and indistinct, but sufficient for his purpose. The man was Amos Kruger.

Kruger walked his horse some distance from town before he broke him into a lope. Jeff followed. A bit to Revere's surprise, Kruger took the trail which led to the K-Bar. Jeff pulled up. If, after all, Kruger's business took him in that direction there was little to gain by following him.

Jeff abruptly reined about and headed for his cabin. Reaching it, he left the horse standing and went inside. As he was lighting the lamp his eyes fell on a piece of paper covered with scrawled, angular writing. His eyes ran over it swiftly:

> Flash Revere—If you got half the guts of a coyote you'll meet me at ten tonight at the spring in the gap near the end of the fence Kruger started. Keep this to yourself and we will settle our fight between us with nobody to horn in,
>
> *George Brent.*

Revere frowned. So Brent was not to be placated; Summers had failed.

Then he heard the drum of hoofbeats, increasing in volume as the rider neared the cabin. Jeff slipped swiftly through the doorway and into the shadows. The vague figure of a horseman came into sight, and the next moment a voice was calling:

"Jeff! Jeff! Where in hell are you?"

Revere stepped into the light. "Here I am, Jack."

Summers slipped from the saddle and grasped him by the arm. "I've been huntin' all over for you. Got Weary lookin', too. Where you been?"

"Never mind right now; what do you want with me?"

"Jeff, what in time made you write that note to George Brent? And what did you say in it? Dang it all! I had everything fixed when a town fellow rode up, handed George a note, and hightailed it. George read it and puffed up like a toad. 'Tell that Revere fella I'll be there,' he said. I tried to explain that I didn't know what he was talkin' about, but he jest swore and walked away. Jeff, what in time is it all about?"

"Note?" Jeff was staring at him. "Was the jigger who delivered it slight of build and forkin' a long-legged bay?"

"That's him. Works around the bank."

"Huh! Read this." Jeff handed the note he had just found to Summers.

So that was it! Two infuriating notes, one to him and one to Brent. Sent with the hope that they would meet and kill each other. A plan worthy of the brain of Amos Kruger.

But why had Kruger been oiling a sixgun? Why did he ride away from town, taking pains that nobody should know of his absence?

Summers finished reading the note. "Well, I'll be danged! So Brent writ you this."

"No more than I wrote the one he re-

ceived," said Jeff shortly. "It's a trick of some kind." He glanced again at his watch. Twenty minutes to ten. "Jack, fork your horse and come runnin'. I got to see that note of Brent's." He was in the saddle and riding before the surprised Summers could move.

DOUBLE GUN-CROSS

Revere did not ride for the clump of trees which surrounded the spring, but struck off at an angle that would permit him to pass it at some distance. Once inside the gap, he swung to the west, heading for the trail from the 71 ranch which Brent would follow in keeping the appointment. His horse, comparatively fresh, left that of Summers behind.

On the 71 trail Jeff pulled up. A vague figure loomed up in the gloom.

"Don't shoot, Brent!" said Jeff sharply.

He caught the glint of starlight on a revolver barrel and raised his hands above his head. "Don't shoot!" he repeated. "That note—it was a trick. I didn't send it."

"Talk fast," ordered Brent grimly.

Jeff did. He told of what he had seen and of the note he had found in his cabin.

Brent swore in amazement. "Let me see it."

"I want to see yours, too. Brent, they figured we'd meet and shoot it out. One of us, or maybe both, would have been killed sure."

Summers rode up on a blowing horse and, shielded behind the animal, they read the messages while Jack held a lighted match. The wording of both was almost identical. The flame died and George Brent lost himself in an explosion of oaths and threats against Kruger.

Jeff was thinking hard. The presence of Kruger still bothered him. And then there came an inkling of the truth, and he drew his breath sharply.

"Listen," he said swiftly. "And do just as I tell you. Somebody is hidin' down there by the spring. I have a scheme to flush him into the open. No time to tell you now. Ride up from his side, but keep quiet. Leave your horses and go afoot the last fifty yards. Keep to the east of the trees, and unless I call for you, keep out of it. You hear me?"

"But—" began Brent.

"No time to explain. Just keep out until I yell for you." Jeff was on his way before either could voice a protest.

Closer and closer to the dark covert he approached, alert, hand ready to dart for the .44 at his side. Some distance away he dismounted, tied the reins to a scrub mesquite, and went ahead on foot. The shadows of the trees loomed against the sky, then he was among them, working his way from cover to cover. Presently he caught sight of the pool of water which marked the spring's overflow. Beyond the pool was a stretch of open ground, and beyond that more trees.

The slightest movement a bit to his right and ahead of him caught Jeff's attention, and he stiffened. A dark figure detached itself from a tree trunk.

Jeff reached overhead, grasped a low hanging branch, and moved it. He saw the figure start at the soft rustle. Again the man's body blended with the shadow of the tree trunk.

Jeff spoke barely above a whisper. "I got you, Kruger!"

There was a startled exclamation, then the sound of a plunging body. Jeff leaped to his right, and for an instant both men stood revealed to each other in the starlight. Kruger made a motion to raise his gun, but Jeff's .44 flashed upward and with a howl of fear the man turned and ran blindly for the open space before the pool, stumbling through the brush, panting, intent only upon getting away from the gun which menaced his back. Out into the open he plunged, Jeff close behind him.

And then, from the shadows across the

pool, a man emerged to stand crouching, faintly revealed in the moonbeams.

Revere shouted: "I'm comin', Huggins!"

Kruger stopped abruptly. Not until then did he realize that Red Huggins, waiting on the far side of the spring for Revere, knew nothing of his employer's presence at the spring. The master mind had slipped a cog. Kruger turned in desperation, looked into the muzzle of Revere's weapon, swung about and opened his mouth to shout.

A shot shattered the night air—the heavy boom of a six-shooter—and Amos Kruger staggered, stepped backwards a step, lounged forward again, instinctively raising his gun. Another shot and Kruger sagged to his knees. Across the pool crouched Red Huggins, his face screwed into a mask of hate and ferocity.

"I got you that time, Flash Revere!" he shouted.

The man who was swaying on his knees toppled sideways, supporting himself with his left hand. With a last pain-ridden effort he raised the gun, steadied it—fired.

For a moment Revere thought the bullet had missed its mark. Huggins stood in that menacing crouch, the expression on his face unchanged; then he gave a horrible, choking cry, and his knees seemed to wilt beneath him.

Jeff leaped forward, but the figure on the far side of the spring did not move. He watched a moment, then stooped and rolled Kruger on his back. The dark eyes gazed serenely at the stars, the stern features had relaxed in what was probably their first peaceful expression since boyhood.

Jeff straightened. "All right, boys," he called quietly.

The troubles of the Kruger Cattle Company were indeed over.

Jefferson Davis Revere again rode along the main street of Hondo. A bare two weeks before he had entered the town, a song in his heart, his eyes alight with enthusiasm for the task ahead of him; now he rode with lips that were straight and tight, and his eyes, although every whit as bright, were cold and hard and a trifle bitter.

Nancy Brent. Why should a Providence supposed to be all-wise and ever just send her into his life? Small comfort the realization that at least she must now know the truth.

The sheriff had asked him to stop at the office on his way from town in order to leave a deposition for use at the inquest, so Jeff drew up at the hitching rack in front of the jail and dismounted. The street was deserted.

Jeff did not know that most of the citizens of Hondo had crowded into the little combination office and jail, enticed there by Jack Summers who had promised them, with ponderous wink and mysterious whisper, some sort of a surprise. Nor did he know that in the general store, next door to the jail, was a contrite and anxious Nancy Brent, brought there by the same Jack Summers in compliance with her demand that she be taken to Revere at once.

Jeff turned his back to the sidewalk and glanced over toward the First Bank of Hondo. It was closed and a black crepe hung on the door. A sense of duty had inspired the clerks to display this last sign of respect for a dead employer.

A voice addressed him from the sidewalk. "Looking for a job, cowboy?"

Paper and tobacco filtered toward the ground. Jeff glanced up quickly, unbelievingly. Nancy Brent! Instinctively he dragged off his hat.

She went on tantalizingly. "An easy job, cowboy. Short hours and good pay. On the 71. How about it?"

Jeff stepped over to the railing. His eyes had lost their bitterness and that old boyish smile had wiped out the hard lines of cheek and jaw.

"Why, ma'am, I—was figurin' on leavin' Hondo. It's a strange country to me. Down

south I know folks; I can get me a job. I—"

Nancy reached forward and placed both hands on his shoulders. "Jeff, look at me. I know everything. I was blind. Ever since mother talked with you, you have been working for us. I don't want you to go."

"But, Miss Nancy, it wasn't me; it was Weary. Didn't Jack tell you?"

She smiled very tenderly. "Of course, he did. He spread it on like a gentleman; but Jack is such a lovable old fibber that I just couldn't believe him. And besides, Weary Lane is a good boy and a wonderful pal; but he would never have been able to match wits with Amos Kruger."

"But he—he loves you, ma'am; and I shore thought that you—you cared—"

"I do. I always have."

"Well, then—"

Her color was high. "I do care; but—but not for Weary."

"Nancy!" In one swift leap he cleared the railing and stood before her.

She went on hurriedly. "Weary left Hondo this morning. He told me to give you this note."

Wonderingly Jeff took it, opened it, read it:

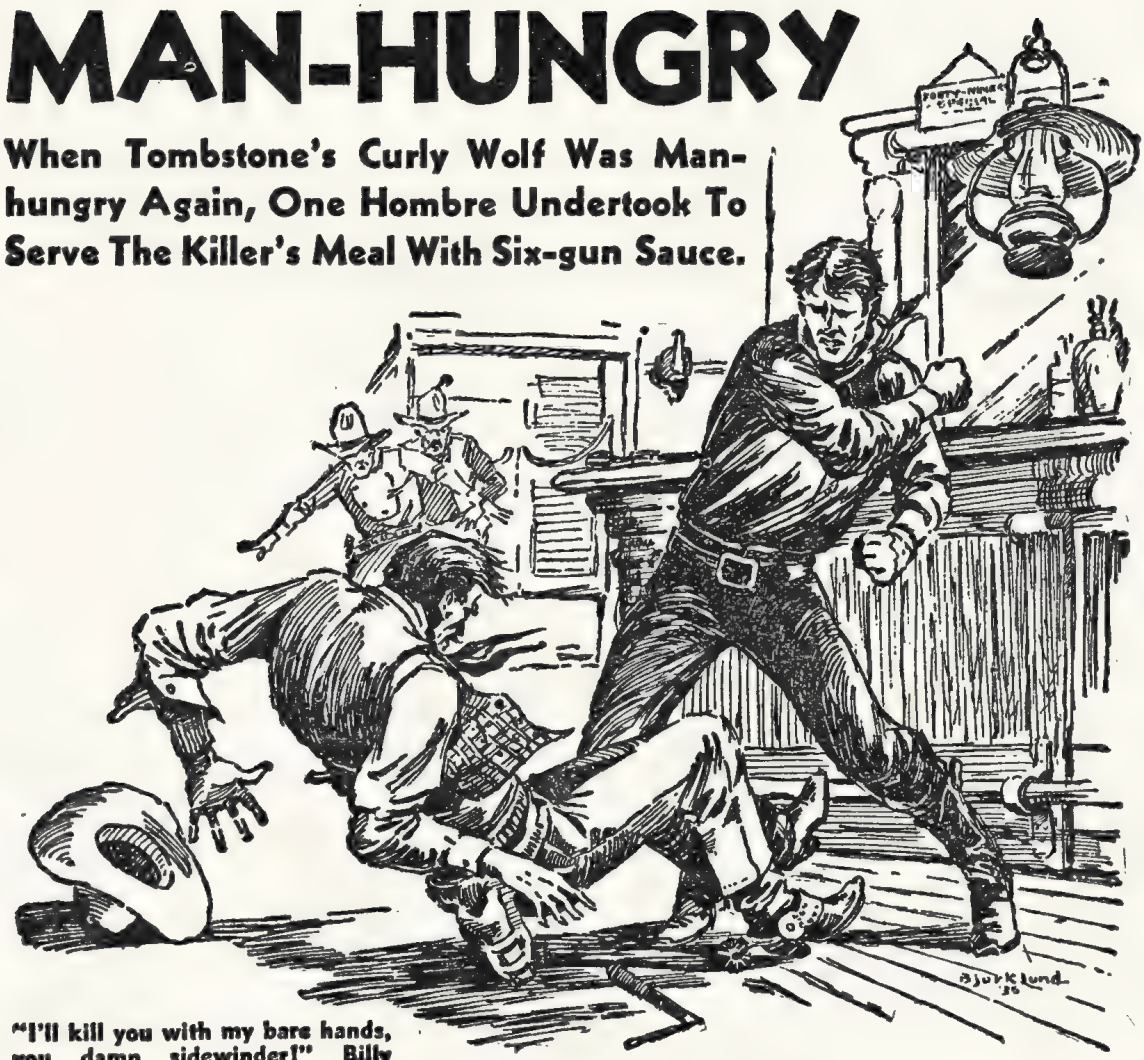
> Dear Jeff—Got the itchy foot and am ramblin. Im a hell of a Romeo. Told you Nancy was too good for me. Its you she loves. Treat her good cowboy and mebbe Ill be seein you mañana.
>
> *Weary.*

Jeff tucked the note into a pocket and for a moment stood looking down into Nancy's eyes. He glanced quickly about; there wasn't a soul in sight. Swiftly, hungrily, he gathered her into his arms.

Inside the sheriff's office Jack Summers look triumphantly into the grinning countenances about him. "Didn't I tell you? Didn't I? Looky! I'll be a gilt-edged son of a six-legged heifer if he ain't kissin' her!"

MAN-HUNGRY

When Tombstone's Curly Wolf Was Man-hungry Again, One Hombre Undertook To Serve The Killer's Meal With Six-gun Sauce.



"I'll kill you with my bare hands, you damn sidewinder!" Billy Berry promised savagely.

by

BRAND DAWSON

Buckskin Riley was man-hungry again, and all of Tombstone knew it because they could read the signs. Proven gun-fighters avoided the yellow-flecked eyes of the killer as he prowled through the three saloons on Allen street looking for gun-bait. The other notch whittlers sighed with relief when Buckskin finally found a victim to appease his appetite.

"Git away from that table, feller. I aim to buck the tiger, an' I wants plenty room!"

The dealer behind the roulette layout glanced up and changed the position of his chair. Buckskin might get the idea that he was manipulating a hidden spring under the table, and Silk Taylor was not ready to die. The single player in front of the spinning wheel did not change his position, and when the wheel stopped turning he placed a stack of chips upon the red and waited for Silk Taylor to start the play.

The gambler sat motionless in his chair until the miner looked up to see what was causing the delay. Silk Taylor jerked his head slightly as he placed both long-fin-

gered hands carefully on the table. In his position it paid to be neutral. Bide Berry shifted his body to follow the jerk of the gambler's head, and after a brief glance at Buckskin Riley he swung back to the wheel.

"Spin 'er, Silk," he drawled in his soft southern voice. "Me an' Billy has struck pay-dirt, an' I aims to twist the tiger's tail ontil she squalls what-fur. Uh hundred on the red!"

Buckskin sneered at the miner's rough clothes as he took a step forward. His left shoulder muscled into a twitch that bucked Bide Berry several feet away from the table, and the gunman took the vacant place as his left hand picked up the stack of chips and tossed them to the floor at the tall miner's feet. The southerner watched the chips roll with a dazed look in his brown eyes; turned his gaze in a stare of slow anger upon Buckskin Riley.

"I begs yore pardon, suh," he drawled quietly. "I see that you are un-accountable for yore manners cause you all is in yore cups. Evenin' to you all, stranger."

Riley straightened up as an expression of surprised anger swept across his swarthy face. To have his challenge ignored was bad enough, but to have this ragged miner call him a stranger in the town where he was the acknowledged kingpin gunman was the insult supreme. He reached out a claw-like hand and caught the tall miner by the shoulder to spin him around.

"Mebbe I had better introduce myself," he sneered softly. "The name is Buckskin Riley."

The tall southerner nodded his head slowly. "Howdy," he drawled. "I'm Bide Berry from Kaintucky, an' I'll be leavin' you all now, Mister Riley. Evenin' to you, suh."

"You pick up them chips an' cash 'em in," Riley growled hoarsely. "Folks hump when I speaks to them."

Bide Berry glanced at the scattered chips and back to the mean face of the gunman. Then he shrugged his big shoulders carelessly.

"All the same over-boarders," he drawled. "Leave 'em for the swamper."

Again he turned slowly on his heel and attempted to leave. Buckskin Riley leaped forward with an oath as his left hand lashed out to slap the miner across the cheek. The slap cracked like a pistol-shot in the long saloon where all the drinkers had withdrawn to the walls to watch the expected gunfight, and Buckskin Riley was leaning forward in a crouch with thumbs hooked in the crossed gunbelts above the worn handles of his guns.

The southerner was also armed, but his old single action Colt was thrust down in the front of his trouser band. Now his soft brown eyes were blazing as he fell back a pace with calloused hand poised above the gun.

"Uh gent cain't die but one time," he drawled slowly. "At ten paces, suh, each of us to turn his back to the other with his gun in his hand. Mistah Taylor will count. At three we turns an' fires accordin' to the code of gentlemen. Do you understand, suh?"

"Gwan," Riley sneered coldly. "You ain't in Kentucky now, yuh blasted hill-billy. Yo're heeled an' I'm heeled. Start reachin' when ever yo're ready, an' the fastest man wins. The loser gits hisself a hole up on Boot Hill."

The face of Bide Berry paled a trifle. Back in his country men backed up their arguments with knife or gun, but they asked for no advantages. He had seen several gunfights in which men had died because they lacked the time to practice the draw from an oiled holster. He knew that Tombstone boasted that she had a man for breakfast every morning, and in his quiet way he had avoided trouble with the professional gun-fighters who stalked down Allen and Tough Nut streets with holsters tied low on their legs. His breed

had never been known to show the white feather, and Bide Berry set himself on his boot-soles as he drew a deep breath.

"I am ready, suh," he drawled quietly.

Little flecks of yellow were dancing across the greenish eyes of the gunman as he licked his thin lips. "Git goin', feller!"

Bide Berry slapped his calloused palm down to the butt of his gun without further argument. His thumb dogged the heavy hammer back as the old Peacemaker slid into view, and Buckskin Riley swooped down with both hands and fired before the seven-inch barrel had cleared the top of Berry's trouser band. Both bullets struck the miner high in the chest to shock him back on his heels. His right hand was still trying to bring the heavy weapon up when Riley shot again. As the miner staggered and sagged to the floor, the killer emptied his right-hand gun into the twitching body with slow-spaced regularity.

Even Curly Bill and Ike Clanton turned their faces at the tigerish cruelty. Both had a dozen notches on the handles of their guns, but Buckskin Riley played his own game because he knew he had no peer at six-gun magic. Now he sneered wolfishly as he holstered his right-hand gun and crouched across the smoking muzzle of the forty-five in his left.

"You all seen him start for his gun first," he growled hoarsely. "Is any friend of the departed takin' up where he fell down?"

Sheriff Johnny Behan sighed and turned toward the swinging doors. He had seen the whole play; would have to testify that Bide Berry started to reach for his gun first. He would be the laughing stock of the town if he tried to arrest the killer, and Johnny Behan was a politician first and sheriff of Cochise county next. Buckskin Riley smiled wolfishly to show yellowed fangs in the corners of his mouth as he thumbed fresh loads into his guns and snugged them down in the worn holsters. He turned to Silk Taylor, who had not moved from behind his layout.

"Bury him with them chips he didn't want to pick up," he said laughingly. "I changed my mind about buckin' the tiger tonight."

Greenish eyes glittering through slitted lids, he stared hard at the other gunfighters as he walked toward the batwing doors. Curly Bill stared into the bottom of his glass without looking up, and Buckskin Riley passed out through the doors as a tall slender youngster came in. Men avoided his gaze as his eyes searched the room, and the young miner stiffened suddenly when he saw the huddled heap on the floor in front of the roulette layout. Feet feeling the way like a man in the dark, he made his way down the long bar and stopped to stare into the face of his older brother.

"It's Bide," he whispered through stiff lips. "You cain't be that drunk, Bide."

The broadcloth-clad gambler looked away quickly as the young miner glanced at him for confirmation. Then the brown eyes widened as the boy saw the pool of blood under the body, and he was on his knees with a little cry of fear as his hand shot out to feel the heart.

"Daid," he muttered dazedly, and his eyes automatically counted the wounds. "Shot seven times before he could press trigger."

He came to his feet like a cat as he whirled to face the crowd in the saloon. "A gang set on ole Bide," he shouted hoarsely. "I take up for him, so step out an' face uh man, you sneakin' pole-cats!"

Silk Taylor reached out a slim hand and touched the young miner lightly on the arm. "Talk easy, Billy," he warned. "Bide had words with Buckskin Riley, an' Buckskin beat him to the draw."

"Where's the damn killer at?" Billy

Berry turned savagely to search the faces along the bar.

Curly Bill walked slowly down the long room and spoke softly. "Think it over, Billy," he advised. "They can't any of us match Buckskin with a hand-gun, an' he give Bide first chance to draw. He'll only kill you, son."

"Bide wasn't no gun-fighter," the young miner shouted as his smooth face worked with grief and anger. "Me an' Bide has been workin' our claim for six months, an' hard work slows uh man's gun-hand down to uh crawl. But I'll git that damn killer as shore as I was borned in ole Kentucky. You fellers heard me."

"Best you see Buryin' Joe Grimm," the gambler suggested. "The inquest won't take long, Billy."

Billy Berry stared down at the body of his brother with eyes that did not see. Then he stumbled down the long saloon and out into Allen street. A few minutes later a tall man in a black frock coat drove a black wagon into the alley behind the Oriental bar, hitched the team to the tie rack, and nodded to his assistant. The front doors opened as he stooped over the body, and Buckskin Riley swaggered through and shouted at the undertaker.

the undertaker warned solemnly. "I advise you to exercise care, my friend."

"You askin' for it?"

Riley was crouching forward with hands shadowing the guns on his thighs. Before the tall undertaker could answer, a suggestive cough cut across the stillness of the long room. Riley stiffened as his eyes darted to the end of the mahogany bar. A dozen known outlaws were lined up with Curly Bill and Ike Clanton, and each of them had a gun in his hand pointing at the killer. Buryin' Joe smiled solemnly and nodded his head slowly.

"There's your answer, Mister Riley," he said quietly. "You will kindly step to one side."

Buckskin Riley scowled and side-stepped to face the ring of outlaws at the bar. Again the little yellow flecks were dancing across the dilated pupils of his eyes. Twice his mouth opened as though he were about to speak; then closed like a steel trap as he whirled on his heel and stomped out the back door. The undertaker and his assistant removed the body and drove away, and the outlaws holstered their weapons and reached for their glasses.

Men stared at the broad back of Billy

"One Move Of Your Guns And I'll Slice Your Ears Off To Around Your Shoulders!"

"When's the funeral?"

Buryin' Joe Grimm straightened up to his six-feet-two and stared his disapproval. "The family has not decided," he clipped. "Due notice will appear in th' morning *Epitaph*."

The killer shrugged. "That means he will be planted before noon," he sneered. "Jest wanted to tell you not to put up no head-board or I'll shoot it full of holes. That feller was a rat, an' he got what was comin' to him."

"You are in the presence of the dead,"

Berry as the young miner leaned against the bar in the Oriental. He was tall and lean like his brother who had just been buried on Boot Hill, but now his young face looked ten years older than his twenty-two years. The brown eyes were clouded with unshed tears in the deep sockets that had not been there before the killing. Heavy lines were etched around the corners of his mouth as he clenched his big hands to control his grief. Hands roughened and scarred from long days of intimate contact with pick and shovel, and the rough men

respected his sorrow and left him alone.

Now he stared into the bottom of his glass that stood untasted on the bar. Bide had been laid away; a neat headboard had been placed on his grave to mark the last resting place. If he was conscious of the crowd he gave no sign as he stared into the glass with eyes that were far away; perhaps in the southern hills of Kentucky.

A silence fell across the noisy room as Buckskin Riley shouldered his way through the batwings and balanced himself on spraddled legs to study the crowd. Then the killer eased the heavy guns in his holsters and stamped across to where Billy Berry, unmindful of danger, leaned against the bar. A snarling voice interrupted his reverie as Riley spoke.

"So you taken up for that brother of yours? I'm waitin' on you, yuh dang hillbilly!"

The young miner turned slowly to stare at him without recognition. "Don't know you," he drawled quietly. "I'd be thankin' you to leave a man alone with his sorrows."

The killer's face darkened with anger. "So I'm uh stranger to you like I was to that worthless brother of yours?" he shouted. "I'm Buckskin Riley, an' I killed that dirty son when he talked out of turn!"

Billy Berry shook his head slowly. "Never heard of you," he answered in his slow drawl. "We jest buried pore Bide uh while ago."

As though he considered the matter settled, he turned back to the bar. Riley reached out his left hand and spun the young miner around. His little eyes were flaming with anger as he stepped back with hands taloned above his guns.

"You told these yere fellers that you was goin' to git me," he growled hoarsely. "Start reachin', Berry!"

"But we buried the daid today," the miner answered softly. "We-uns don't fight ontil our folks is restin' peaceful-like, Mistah Riley."

Again he turned back to the bar, and the killer filled his hand with a swift pass and jammed the gun against Billy Berry's chest.

"You listen to me or I'll blast yuh apart!" he raged. "I'm givin' you uh chance to go for yore iron!"

He stepped back and holstered his gun as the brown eyes stared him in the face with no emotion visible in their depths. Then the miner threw back his rough jacket as he drawled in his soft voice:

"Back home we don't tote uh weapon when we lay our daid away," he reproved gently. "It don't seem fitten nor proper."

The killer glanced down at the sturdy legs and sneered. "You was afraid to pack yore iron for fear I'd give you the same dose," he growled. "Now you go home an' git yoreself dressed like a man. I'm shootin' on sight the next time I sees you. You done passed notice on me, an' I'm passin' it right back. The jigger don't keep on livin' what insults Buckskin Riley!"

Billy Berry yawned behind his hand and turned his back on his brother's killer. Riley made a move toward the guns on his legs, and the town marshal stepped up and tapped him on the arm.

"Stand hitched! You can't shoot an unarmed man while I'm the law here in Tombstone."

"You lookin' for trouble?"

The marshal smiled gently as he holstered the gun in his right hand. "Did you ever hear of me runnin' away from it?" he asked quietly.

"It ain't none of yore put in," Riley snarled. "I'll settle with you when I'm through with that skunk yonder."

Wyatt Earp smiled grimly. "I'll be waitin', but I doubts that yuh'll live that long," he remarked quietly. "That feller is from the mountains of Kentucky, if that tells you anything, Riley. They don't think jest like we does, but I ain't never seen one of them turn yellow yet. Don't say I didn't warn you!"

Buckskin Riley sneered but remained

silent. Of all the gunmen in Tombstone, he knew that this tall marshal was considered the most deadly. Men listened when Wyatt Earp spoke, and most times he did his talking after his guns had paved the right of way. The killer pivoted on his heel and swaggered through the door, and after staring at the back of the young miner for a moment, the marshal shrugged his shoulders and turned away. Billy Berry was still staring into the bottom of his glass with that faraway look in his brown eyes.

Bets were made as to the outcome of the fight between the slow-speaking miner and Buckskin Riley. The heaviest betters were the outlaws who packed the long rooms of the Alhambra and the Oriental bars. By some subtle means they knew that Billy Berry was not afraid of the green-eyed killer who counted nine notches on his gun-handle, and when he walked quietly into the Oriental the night following the funeral of his brother, they watched his deliberate movements with unmistakable respect.

As before the young miner took his place at the end of the bar farthest from the swinging doors. He ordered a glass of whiskey which remained untasted before him on the smooth bar. The back door in the card room opened slowly, and Buckskin Riley leaped through with six-gun in his right hand. Men shrank back out of the line of fire as the killer shouted a warning.

"I'm waitin', Berry! You got yoreself heeled?"

Billy Berry turned without haste. His rough coat was buttoned tightly around his slender waist, but there was no smile on his tanned face as he stared into Riley's blazing eyes.

"Put up yore guns," he drawled quietly. "I left mine to home."

"You done passed notice," Riley shouted hoarsely. "Now you borrow yoreself the lend of uh gun before I whip you with this 'un. I'll pistol-whip you till you can't stand up!"

"I said I'd git you," the southerner corrected softly. "But I didn't say I'd do it with guns. In my country a gent has got the right to choose his weapons when another gent challenges him. So I'm ready to meet you like I said."

The killer's jaw fell as he stared at the miner. "Yeah?" he said at last. "Keep on talkin', feller. Yo're due to fill uh hole on Boot Hill beside yore brother."

"Mebbe not," the miner answered gently. "Put that gun up, cause I ain't heeled!"

Buckskin Riley glanced around at the ring of faces. If he shot his enemy after being told that said enemy was unarmed, the charge would be murder. Either Sheriff Johnny Behan or Marshal Wyatt Earp would take him in without fear or favor, and the pen over at Yuma was full of killers who had beaten the noose. He holstered the heavy forty-five while his little eyes watched the miner carefully.

Billy Berry slowly unbuttoned his coat and stepped back from the bar. Then he took a bulky package from under his arm, wrapped in a red bandanna. Laying this on the bar, he carefully unwrapped it and pointed with his right hand. Two keen-edged Bowie knives glittered under the yellow light of the coal-oil lamps.

"Handkerchief duel," he drawled quietly. "You has yore choice of th' knives, after which some gent ties both our left wrists together. Then we each takes a knife in our hand and stands ready till some feller gives the sign. After that we gits on with our ruckus until one or the other cuts hisself loose from a dead man. It takes guts to go up again cold steel, Riley. An' the dead man is goin' to be you."

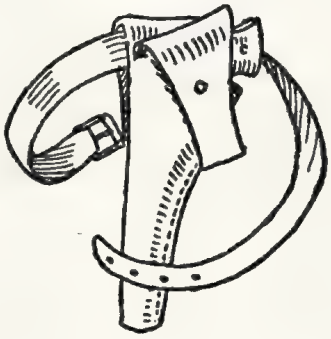
Curly Bill and Ike Clanton shuddered. Any one of a dozen gun-fighters would go up against hot lead, but cold steel was something that took cold nerve as the young miner had pointed out. Buckskin Riley turned the offer down flatly.

"We'll shoot it out," he muttered hoarsely. "Knives is out of my line."

"Guns was out of ole Bide's line," Berry reminded softly. "I can cut the head offen a snake with one of them knives at thirty feet. Don't you move!"

His right hand had picked up one of the knives as he spoke; his thumb testing the razor-edge with caressing familiarity. Buckskin Riley stopped the hand that was hurtling toward his gun, and his face was ashy as the miner held the knife in the palm of his hand for a throw.

"Move jest one time an' I'll slice yore ears off down around yore shoulders," the Kentuckian drawled. "Jest one li'l wiggle of the finger!"



The killer held his arms out away from his sides as the blood drained from his face. Billy Berry advanced slowly with the knife poised in his calloused palm. Then he reached out and emptied Riley's holsters, placing the two heavy guns back on the bar out of reach. The crowd of men watched him with fascination like a bird watches a charming snake. Billy Berry stepped back to his own place by the other knife.

"Yo're as yeller as the outside of uh punkin in corn-shuckin' time," he sneered. "Step out there an' git this bandanna tied around yo're wrist!"

Riley wet his lips and shuffled his feet as his eyes darted down to his half boots. The young miner again drew back his arm as his voice drawled a low warning.

"I know you got a hide-out in yore right boot, so jest you make uh try for that derringer. I'm goin' tuh stick this knife in yore belly an' walk around you in uh circle. Step up here an' hold out your left wrist!"

"Hold on uh minute," Riley shouted in desperation. "You said that the feller what challenges the other has his choice of weapons. You told all these fellers that you was goin' tuh git me first."

"Yo're uh liar," Berry contradicted flatly. "You asked right after the killin' if any one wanted to take up for the departed!"

"That makes us even, as long as we don't use the weapon each of us is best at," Riley stated with more confidence. "I'm willin' tuh meet you another way."

"Put uh handle on it," Berry drawled. "Uh man cain't die but one time."

"Bare fists," Riley suggested eagerly. "They ain't five pounds difference between us!" He measured Billy Berry calculatingly.

Billy Berry sighed and laid the knife in the red bandanna. Then he peeled off his rough coat and rolled up his sleeves. The muscles twisted like snakes in his powerful biceps, and Buckskin Riley threw his tall Stetson behind him and shucked his vest. Wyatt Earp stepped out from the card room and threw down on Riley with his right-hand gun.

"Hands up, Riley," he ordered sternly. "Till I takes that hide-out from yore boot!"

The gunman scowled as the marshal stooped over and withdrew the short-barreled derringer. Billy Berry stepped out of his boots and faced his enemy in his socks.

"Uh hill-billy moves around better in his bare feet," he explained solemnly. "You ready, skunk?"

Buckskin Riley leaped forward as he lashed out with his left fist. His right boot stamped down on Berry's left foot at the same time his fist landed, and the young miner was knocked to the floor because he could not shift his feet. Riley was on top of him like a mountain cat, but Berry rolled quickly and came up with the killer hanging on his back. Down went his head as he bucked forward with a snap of his back, and Buckskin Riley flew into space and came to earth on hands and feet.

Berry was after him like a charging lion; stopped until Riley came to his feet with a roar of rage. Then the young miner stepped in with short-arm blows that cut the killer's face to ribbons before he could set himself for another rush.

Berry forced him back until his shoulders touched the bar. Riley was breathing heavily as his little eyes rested on the Bowie knives, and he stabbed with his left as his right hand snaked out to grab one of the knives. Billy Berry stiffened his body as his right came up from the hip, and his fist nearly tore the killer's head from his shoulders as he found the unprotected jaw.

The knife dropped from his fingers as he hung suspended in air for a moment; dropped forward on his bleeding face as the southerner stepped back to let him fall. Berry was breathing easily as he watched the unconscious man for a moment, after which he leaned down and unbuckled one of the heavy gunbelts.

The crowd stared at him in surprise as he buckled the belt around his own waist, and stepped to the bar where the brace of forty-fives twinkled under the lamps. Taking the right-hand gun, he examined the cartridges and hefted the balance several times while his thumb dogged back the hammer. Then he holstered the weapon on his right leg and jerked his head to the bartender.

"Slop him," he drawled. "I an' him isn't finished yet!"

The bartender walked around the bar and threw a pitcher of cold water into the upturned face. Buckskin Riley spluttered and came to his haunches; glared wildly around him before covering his face with his heavy arms.

"Git up," Berry drawled quietly. "I ain't never learned tuh kick a feller when he's on the floor!"

Slowly the thick arms fell while the beaten gunman stared at the tall miner. Scarcely a mark showed on Berry's smooth face, while the face of Riley was a bloody criss-cross of cuts where the rocky fists of the miner had left their imprints. Riley's left eye was closed, and he spat teeth into the brass spittoon as he lurched to his feet with a stagger. His hands went automatically to the holsters on his legs; stopped when the right hand clawed air where the familiar holster should have been.

None of the crowd made a sound as he looked around to get his bearings. Then he stared at the holster on the young miner's right leg; back to the single gun on the counter.

"I've changed my mind," Berry drawled. "I did challenge you, but I dis-remembered for the time. So we kin settle this here ruckus with guns like you said."

"You got my right-hand gun," Riley whispered. "That's the gun . . . ?"

His voice trailed off to a whisper. "I know," Berry nodded. "That's the gun what done for ole Bide. Seein' that you are uh two-gun sharp, you kin use yore left, an' I'll go again you with my right hand!"

He leaned across the bar and took the other weapon. Then he stepped forward and snugged it into the holster on Riley's left leg. After which he stepped back and waited.

Buckskin Riley glared at him with one good eye. His right hand clawed nervously at his leg, and he whirled angrily when a snicker sounded from the crowd behind him.

"Who's laughin'?" he snarled. "I'll settle with that gent later."

"I was," Wyatt Earp spoke up. "You look like hell, feller."

The killer squirmed when the crowd broke into low chuckles. An hour earlier not a man in that crowd would have dared to laugh at him.

Now he knew that he would have to beat this smooth-faced southerner or take his place on Boot Hill with those that had once been called great. There could be no middle course; they would hoot him out of the silver camp unless he made good his threats.

"I'll fight him tomorrow," he growled. "I ain't in shape right now."

"You'll fight him tonight or git out of town," the marshal told him. "You called this feller's hand."

"Looky," Billy Berry said softly. "Me an' Bide was all each other had. We come out here from back Kaintucky way for to make our fortunes. We done hit, an' Bide wasn't uh fightin' feller at no time. He always got along with folks, but he was too proud to back water when you got man-hungry for blood."

"The law saw that feller start first for his gun," Riley growled. "She was self defense clean as a whistle."

"An' Bide was my brother," the miner repeated softly. "I got the same blood that he had in his veins. I was minded for a while to kill you with my bare maulies, but you asked for guns. You didn't pack the sand to take me with knives, an' I aims to git you legal or lay down beside old Bide."

Buckskin Riley was recovering his strength while he stalled for time. He knew that he could beat this slow-talking southerner with his left hand; knew that one hand was just as fast as the other from months and years of long practice. Now he deliberately leaned against the bar and sneered at the watching miner.

"How you want to play it?" he asked. "Drop uh hat?"

"We both throwed our hats away," Berry answered, and there was a hint of amusement in his drawling voice. "Yonder is Buryin' Joe Grimm waitin' to haul you away."

Anger leaped once more to the little green eyes as the killer glanced at the tall undertaker. He had deliberately tried to make his opponent lose his head, and he shouted his anger because the tables had been so neatly turned.

"Git out of here, yuh lanky buzzard! You wahn't sent for."

"Shoot him high up if you can," the undertaker solemnly suggested, as he turned to Billy Berry. "That way it makes my work a lot easier."

Billy Berry smiled almost happily as he watched the long hands twisting like snakes, and spoke a gentle warning.

"Yore left hand, skunk. I don't want no aidge!"

The left hand of the killer struck down at the gun-handle without warning. Billy Berry took one quick step to the right as his hand blurred under the yellow lights with unexpected speed. That quick step was all that saved him as the killer shot from the hip at the spot where he had stood, and the heavy gun bucked in his hand as he echoed the roar of Riley's gun.

The killer's right arm jerked back as the heavy slug took him high in the shoulder, and he whirled around to bring his gun in line as Berry's gun roared again. Riley clutched at his stomach as his knees buckled, and his face was a devil's mask as he struggled to bring up the gun in his left hand.

Billy Berry's face was calm as he watched the silent struggle; then he fired three shots slowly as the powder smoke curled about his head. The gun slipped from Buckskin Riley's fingers as the heavy slugs battered him to the sawdust near the spot where he had killed Bide Berry.

The miner crouched above the borrowed weapon until the long legs had stopped kicking, after which he unbuckled the belt and threw it across the room where it coiled about the boots of Riley like a snake. The gun followed, and Billy Berry turned to the bar and wrapped the two Bowie knives in the red bandanna. He stopped in front of Buryin' Joe Grimm on his way to the door."

"Plant him as is, an' charge it to me," he drawled. "You wantin' me, Marshal?"

Wyatt Earp shook his tawny head. "Not me," he answered loudly. "Buckskin was man-hungry, an' he bit off too much man. She's self defense, Billy. The law speakin'!"

The Cactus City Department

VOL. 12 NO. 36

BAD GUESSES SEND PLENTY TO HELL FAST

You Can't Slap the Devil and Live; He Kicks Too Fast For That

This last week has seen quite a few local citizens give up the ghost and depart our town, hell bent. And looking down the list, it appears that they all died of the same thing—bad judgment.

Monday, Soledad Slim started the week by guessing that the shotgun he was going to clean wasn't loaded. He made a bad guess.

Tuesday, Cold-deck Dixon guessed that nobody would notice if he took a couple of cards off the bottom of the deck. Cold-deck will never guess no more.

Wednesday, Laster the Lady's Man, guessed that a certain good-looking filly's husband wouldn't be home till Friday. His guess was wrong by just two days.

Thursday, Flash Flannigan guessed he was quicker on the draw than Speed Specer. Flash won't get a second guess.

Friday, Nugget Nash guessed that all the shots of powder he had set in his mine shaft had gone off. Well, he only missed it one.

Saturday, Slow-elk Edwards guessed he'd build up his beef herd the quickest way. That was just plain poor guessing.

Sunday being the day of rest, there was more doing than usual. It seems like everybody can get into more trouble when they ain't got anything to do. Peeler Perrin guessed he could ride a man-killing bronc without the help of a pick-up man. One unidentified hombre guessed that Sunday would be a good day to hold up the Brimstone stage. And Swede Swenson guessed he was a curly wolf and it was his night to howl. None of them three guessed

(Next col.)

PERSONALS

This week Mrs. McGonigle is carrying her right arm in a sling, proving once more that parents ain't far wrong when they say, "This hurts me worser than it does you," as they give their kids a licking.

When little Bobby cut up his mother's best Navajo rug to make a saddle-blanket, he must of figured he would get a licking for it—else he wouldn't have put a board in his pants.

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Coroner Dan Sawyer says that if any relative wants to claim the body which he found back of the Cantina the other morning, why, they had better hurry up. A corpse won't keep forever in this kind of climate, you know.

—

Chinks sure have a lot of funny ideas, and celebrating New Year's in the early spring instead of Jan. 1st is one of them. They celebrate for a whole week, instead of just a day like we do. Shooting off firecrackers and burning punk is their idea of raising merry hell. This year Hi Hip of the Chink Laundry also celebrated by getting drunk on rice wine and burning a hole in my best purple shirt.

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The peddler who was through Cactus City the other day couldn't have done any more business if he had been

(See next page)

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correct, so they have gone to the foot of the class.

That guessing business is one thing you can't learn by experience. Either you're right or you're wrong the first time. If you're right, you get to guess again some time; if you're wrong, your guessing days are over—unless you happen to be one of these here optimists and want to guess whether your next camp will be heaven or hell. But for most gents around here, that last ain't a guess; it's a dead cinch.

OWL-EYE OWEN GULPS; GLASS EYE GONE

Breakable Optic Not Back Yet, But Patient Hopeful

Owl-eye Owen is wearing a black patch over the place where his left eye ought to be, on account of the simple reason that the glass eye he generally wears on the left side of his face has been misplaced temporarily.

Maybe you folks don't know it, but a glass eye is treated all the same as a set of false teeth. That is, at night those things are supposed to be soaked in a glass of water. Just what good that does to them, I don't know, but that is the rules of wearing same. And Owl-eye is very careful to follow that rule with his china eye, as he is very proud of same (which is the only one in Cactus County) even if it ain't a very good match with his real one. (It's the glass eye which is brown; the blue one is real.)

Anyway, Owl-eye put his eye in a glass of water the same as usual last night, after eating a hearty supper of *chili rellenos*. Then in the middle of the night he woke up with a awful thirst, account of the *chili* he et. After considerable fumbling around in the dark, he dippers hisself out a glass of water, quenches said thirst and goes back to bed. Well, came the dawn and of course it turns out that the dang fool had picked his eye-soaking glass to give hisself a drink out of. He had gulped it down, water, eye and all.

However, Owl-eye is not much worried over the present inconvenience of having only one eye to see with. He allows that with a little luck he will have his glass eye back in a few days.

EDITORIAL

The Women's Sociable Society is at it again! I mean they are agitating another Reform Movement. They already have raised more hullabaloo in this town than a skunk with his tail up, but they ain't satisfied yet. Personally, I believe they will end up by making a bunch of shame-face coyotes out'n the curly wolfs who at present are wearing the pants in our fair city. The first thing you know, the menfolks of Cactus City will no more resemble red-blooded, gun-toting, high-riding he-men than a steer resembles a bull.

But without no more beating in the brush, let me inform you what these dang females is up to now. They want to make it illegal to kill a gent except by gut-shooting him! Honest, that is their present Reform Movement! They want a killing bullet placed where it won't show. Their reason is that shooting a man in the head makes an awful mess out of him—and a hell of a looking corpse.

Well, I will agree with them on that. An hombre who has stopped a couple .45 slugs with his head, like Dry-gulch Getchell did last week, don't make a very handsome guest of honor at a funeral. Nobody could have accused Dry-gulch of looking natural.

But on the other hand, I bet you that Dry-gulch didn't give a damn. When a man is dead, he's dead, and hasn't got no more interest in the proceedings. And whether he got shot in the head or the belly don't matter to him—or to anybody else, excepting these womenfolks who can't think of nothing but the looks of things.

Hell's Fire! You hombres who have the bad judgment to have a wife had better come to your senses. It's up to you gents to argue how impractical, illogical and impossible it is to always be doing your killing so the deceased will look pretty and natural. And if you lily-livered, hen-picked dehorned steers can't convince your wife with words, why try beating her. The business of the women wearing pants in this town has got to stop!

PERSONALS

(Continued from 1st page)

selling ice water in hell. It seemed like all the buckaroos in the country bought theirselfs some silver conchas for their chaps or their riding gear at bargain prices. Anyways, the peddler said they was silver and also a bargain, and a lot of bullet-head buckaroos believed him.

Well, now, that peddler might have been telling the truth, but I never heard tell of silver tomato cans, which those conchas were sure as hell made out of. You bargain-buying buckaroos had better stay in out of the rain, if it ever rains, or you'll get those "silver" conchas all rusty.

Hank Norton, the railroad agent, was presented with one hell of a bawling out from his boss the other day. Hank held up the morning train for almost an hour recently while he made out bill-of-ladings and did other duties which should have been did before the train arrived. You see, Hank was caught with his pants down because the 9:15 train pulled in at ten o'clock sharp, instead of eleven as it usually does.

It looks like the Cactus City Volunteer Fire Department is going to have to get along without a Chief for a while. After Smokey Small, who was the chief, moved away from Cactus City, why, the boys got together and elected Charcoal Chase to be Chief. But Charcoal didn't fit the job, and before the boys elected another Chief they did a little investigating and come to find out why none of them could hold the Chief's job.

You see, the tin hat which has CHIEF written on it in gold letters is kind of a odd size. It is too big for Charcoal and too small for the rest of the boys. So the C C V F D will just have te get along without a Chief until somebody who has the right size head joins up with them. The CHIEF tin hat is at Judd Ovitt's drugstore if any you rannyhans want to try it on.

COYOTE CATCHER CATCHES CASH

Now We Need a New Coyote Catcher Pronto

Trapper Truman is no longer the official Coyote Hunter for Cactus County, and the job is open to any gent who wants same. There is no salary to the job; it's piece work. The Official Hunter is paid one buck (US) for every coyote hide he brings in. It can be made a right good business for one of you citizens, but let this be a warning to the gent who takes the job not to try and make it TOO good a business like Truman tried to do.

Judd Ovitt down to the drugstore also is County Treasurer that Truman brought the varmint pelts to for the pay-off. Judd, after counting the hides and giving Truman one peso per each of them, was in the habit of taking the pelts and throwing them into a unused corner of the basement of his store, and then forgetting all about them for a while.

During this last winter Truman got to bringing in more hides than usual, and Judd he figured that pretty quick his basement would be all chock full of hides if he didn't take them out and burn them. After considerable putting off, he finally got around to that chore, and he took a deep breath and started hauling out the hides. But he got a awful shock when he could find only a couple dozen skins back in the corner instead of a couple hundred.

Well, it didn't take Judd long to put two and two together and make six out of it, which explained a lot of things. It explained why Truman had been cashing in so many hides lately and it also explained why those hides was moth-eaten and frazzled—which wasn't from the coyotes having mange, like Truman said, but from being used over and over again. It also explains why Truman is no longer official Coyote Hunter for Cactus County no more.

The Killer Kid

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Author of "Blood Law," "Jailbird," etc.

ABOUT twenty-six, built like a steel bridge, sandy-haired and gray-eyed, was this Bill Carter. The collar of his rumpled blue serge coat was turned high. The rim of his black slouch hat was pulled low in front. On his right hip he packed a gun, a Colt .38. He kept to the deep shadows between two ramshackle old buildings across the railroad from the station, watched and listened intently.

Soon there came from off southward a long, hoarse blast from the whistle of a locomotive. He knew it to be the first northbound night freight, and he tensed. Then his eyes picked out the figure of a rather well-dressed young man on the station platform. It was Jim Wylie, railroad dick, waiting to catch the caboose on the fly, since the freight would not stop in Palmetto City.

The train was running at less than half speed when it came between Bill Carter and the detective. Bill's gaze ran down the long string of cars. All the side doors save one were closed, that one being the door of an empty. He broke and ran for it, reached it, placed his hands on the floor edge and vaulted inside, landed swearing softly because he'd dropped his gun as he made the leap. For a reason of his own, Carter had to catch this train, and he didn't dare risk going back for the weapon.

He felt his way through the blackness, and sat down on one heel with his back against a corner. The train rumbled on, picking up speed as it left the small Florida east coast town behind. Carter became aware of a presence, aware that he was not alone in the car.

"Hello, 'bo," he hazarded in the unmistakable drawl of a native-born Southerner.

In the corner a few feet to his left a match flared. He saw a beady-eyed, rat-faced youth dressed flashily, which included a checkerboard cap cocked on one side.

"Stick 'em straight up, you!" ordered the youth, jerking a stub-nosed automatic pistol to a level. He, also, was a Southerner, but he did not drawl his words. "Fast, big boy!"

"Shore," replied Carter. He obeyed. That had been rotten luck, losing his gun.

The other dropped the burned match, stepped to him, ran a hand deftly through his pockets.

"No hardware? Okay. Who the hell are you, anyhow?"

"Right now I'm not broadcastin' my name to anybody I happen to meet up with," soberly said Bill Carter. "I reckon it don't matter very much to you, kid, does it?"

The kid's voice was thin and cold. "Not a hell of a lot. You can let your paws down, but y'better see that they behaves real strict."

Little TNT Finds It Pays to Know the Country

"I get you. How far north you goin', kid?"

"None o' your business." It was a snarl. Then, "A whole train o' cars, and you picked this solitary one. How come that, big boy?"

"It was the only open door I saw," Carter answered promptly. "Say, I had four one-dollar bills in my pocket, and you got 'em. I was jus' thinkin' I could mebbe do you a favor, too."

"What is it?"

"We-e-ell, I——"

"What is it?" cut in the thin, rodent voice.

SOMETHING was nudging Carter's ribs. He knew very well that it was the muzzle of the pistol.

"Careful with that thing, son. It might go off. Why—a railroad dick hopped this train back there where I got on. It happens that I know him, and I don't like him, never did. This rattler stops at the next town, which is Riverton, for water, and then the dick and the crew is purty apt to search for you everywhere."

"Who do they think I am?"

"They know," said Carter. "Your picture is posted purty well all along the F. E. C. line, on stations and in post offices. Saw it myself, back in Palmetto City, and reco'nized you when you struck that match a minute ago. The posters says you're Little TNT, a kid killer from Savannah, and that you murdered a water front cop in Key West last week. I think that dick knows you're on this train somewhere. Got word from Miami, mebbe."

Little TNT, the kid killer from Savannah, swore like a person who has vitriol in his mouth. The train rumbled on. At last the youthful crook spoke, and in evident desperation.

"You know this country, 'bo?"

"Been up and down this coast a dozen times or more. Yeah, I know it right well. Why?"

Little TNT crept closer. He kept his gun ready.

"This is why. They've got me in a trap, and you're goin' to lead me out of it. You're goin' to take me inland to where I can git a train up through the middle o' the state. We'll drop off o' this train as soon as it begins to slow up for Riverton. No ifs and ands. That's what you're goin' to do, big boy. You git me, don't you?"

Again the pistol barrel was nudging Bill Carter's ribs. He recalled the wording of the Little TNT reward poster. If it were only half true, the youth at his side was about ten times as dangerous as a rattlesnake. Carter had his short comings, but cowardice was not one of them. He set a proper value on his life, that was all.

"I get you," he said. "I'll help you 'scape from that railroad dick, because I don't like him and I don't want him to have you. That's the truth, kid, if ever I told the truth."

"Fine. But I'm watchin' you just the same," said Little TNT.

The freight roared on. After a few minutes, the whistle split the sub-tropical night with a long blast.

"That's for Riverton," Carter said. "Get ready, kid."

"I'm ready now," was the instant response. "You want to let yourself down

easy out o' the door, swing your feet ahead, and hit the ground runnin'. If you don't, you're li'ble to break your damn neck, big boy."

"As if I didn't know that." Bill Carter laughed. "Up to me to go first, I reckon."

"You said it. Train's slowin'. Come on —and no tricks, or I'll blow your head off. Don't you fergit that."

"I ain't likely to," Carter said.

HE LET himself out of the doorway with his weight on his hands, swung his feet well forward, let go and struck the ground running. He tripped and fell, but was not in the least injured. The kid alighted nimbly, and hurried back to Carter, who rose brushing sand from his knees and then peered into the darkness that lay off westward.

When the caboose bearing the railroad dick had passed them, the bigger man said, "Shore to be rough goin' off there. Woods and swamps, and mosquitoes by the billion, and p'izen snakes. I think we better get a little ways from the railroad and build a smudge fire to keep the mosquitoes off, waitin' until daylight to go on."

"Not me." The little killer swore. "We're goin' on right now. Lead the way —and remember this: one move that I don't like, and I'll leave you for the buzzards to pick!"

Carter led the way into flat pine woods thick with gallberry bush and scrub palmetto. There was, he figured, one swell chance that the murderous rat behind him would shoot him when he was through with him, in order to keep his mouth shut. He began to do some hard thinking as they trudged through the black woods.

The slight breeze was off the nearby Atlantic, and a saltwater haze had blotted out the stars. It became so dark that Carter had almost to feel his way. Each time he paused, he felt cold steel at his back. Two miles, and they reached the outskirts of a sawgrass-and-popash swamp.

"Plenty o' cottonmouth moccasins ahead, kid," said Bill Carter. "You think a snake bites the man in front; eh? Well, as often as not a snake bites the second man instead o' the first. We better camp here."

"Go on!" ordered Little TNT.

Carter went on. But he had no intention of crossing the swamp. Woods wise without the stars to guide him, he turned gradually southward in the edge of the marsh, and the other did not suspect. He was thinking harder than ever now, this Bill Carter.

Then he had an idea that promised something.

"Listen, kid. If I'd been in yore place, I think I'd 'a' hooked me a automobile for a getaway and let the trains alone."

FOR the hundredth time that night he slapped at a mosquito. The tiny winged pests had been making life a torture for Little TNT also.

"That don't sound so bad even now," said the diminutive killer. "Can you drive a car, big boy?"

"Them old-style flivvers, yeah. I can make 'em eat out o' my hand, set up and say 'uncle,' and nearly make 'em climb a tree. Why?"

"How far is it to the closest town west o' that Riverton place?"

"Oh," drawled Bill Carter, " 'bout eight miles, I reckon. Why?"

"We'll steal a flivver there," Little TNT said, "and you'll drive it. When I'm in the clear, on a good road, I'll let you go, rememberin' that you helped me git away from that smart railroad dick."

"Yeah, you'll let me go," Carter told himself wisely—"with a bullet hole through my head to keep me from talkin'." Aloud, "We-e-e-ell——"

"Walk faster," Little TNT cut in, jabbing the muzzle of his small blue gun against Bill Carter's spine. "And don't fergit that I'm right behind you with a itchin' trigger finger."

Almost three hours afterward, they sighted scattered street lights along the main street of a small town. No flivvers were parked anywhere in sight. Carter led the way half a block off the main street, and into a dark alleyway. Under a shed back of a squat brick building they came upon an old Model T without top or windshield, but with fair tires and gas in its tank. Carter steered it and pushed at the same time. His dangerous companion kept behind him, pushed with one hand and held his gun ready in the other. At last they managed to run the old car down the alley and into a dim cross street.

Then, still with the ugly automatic threatening, Carter cranked the flivver and got in, took the wheel. Little TNT got into the front seat beside him, and they went whizzing away, the lights dimming when Carter let the clutch pedal back into high. The street ended soon, became a crooked road. When it reached this point the ancient car was doing its level best.

Then, quick as a flash, Bill Carter braced his feet against the dash and turned her into a liveoak tree.

The kid killer from Savannah came to an hour later to see Carter and another man bending over him. Near them on a box an oil lamp burned. Carter's face and hands were scratched and bruised, but he was grinning.

"I couldn't make her climb that tree, son," said Carter, "but I done my derned-est. There'll be no trouble about us stealin' the flivver, because it's my own flivver —the reward that's out for you will make good the damage, and then some. You followed me right back to Palmetto City, the county seat, if it'll do you any good to know it!"

Little TNT's blinking gaze wandered to a square of strong iron latticework. He was in a jail cell! Uncertainly he put a hand to his neatly bandaged head.

"Who the hell are you?" he spat in his thin, rodent voice.

"The Palmetto City sheriff, that's all," quietly answered Bill Carter. "I simply couldn't have that smart railroad dick beatin' me to a arrest in my own county, don't you see?"

PILLS FOR PIRACY

John Caldwell

CHINA is honeycombed with a thousand and one small pill shops which sell pellets for every ailment from falling hair to fear of the water. These shops may even be found along the highways to supply sick travelers whose condition is too serious to allow further journey to the cities.

Most Chinese remedies are made from animal bones and tissues, ginseng being the single vegetable exception. In one famous establishment at the edge of China are hundreds of lacquered cases, holding perhaps a million deer pills. According to the Chinese there are special medicinal properties in the deer, so that when the animal is slaughtered there will be nothing wasted. Certain fevers are treated by a solution of powdered deer hoof. Deer antlers are compounded to give strength to the weak.

Bear paws soaked in alcohol are prescribed for gout while the baked brains of infants are supposed to be quite marvelous as a preventive of skin diseases. To add to the list, other pills are made of such widely different ingredients as desiccated lizards, centipedes and snakes, dried buffalo hide, powdered cobwebs, bat wings, and rat bones.

Such queer mixtures are not alone sold for cure of pain and illness. If a common soldier expects a battle on the morrow, he will buy the infallible aid to bravery—the powdered heart of a tiger. Or if he contemplates entering the profession of pirate or bandit, he may purchase the greatest courage-producer of all; surprisingly, the heart of a bandit! The bewildering handbill of one pill merchant read thus: "Who would not wish to be as brave as Yo Fei, God of War? For the payment of a single ounce of silver—is it not ridiculously cheap?—you can gain this courage. The famous bandit, As Tsong, is no more. Would you not like to eat the heart of the brigand Ah Tsong and henceforth fear no man? Come with amazing promptness, for only three of these pills are in existence!"

Dog Leg Was a Mining Camp Up Zeno Canyon, With Its Own Ideas of Civic Administration

LUNK-HEAD JOHNSON

By ELLIS PARKER BUTLER

IT IS amazing what a little kindness and appreciation will do for a man. There was the case of Lunk-head Johnson, for instance. If ever there was a useless old bum——but listen to his story.

This Lunk-head Johnson drifted into Dog Leg, the mining camp up Zeno Canyon, with a pick and a shovel and a burro and not much else but the need of a bath and a beard like a pirate, and began making a hole in the rock under the impression that he was making a mine. Forty-two or forty-three advisers immediately told him he was a lunk-head to locate his mine where he did; they were right and he never did get anything out of his mine but rock and the name stuck to him. The miners used to say of anyone who was extra dumb, "He's as loony as Lunk-head Johnson."

Dog Leg, away up there at the head of the canyon, was rough and raw, and some of the toughest specimens of male humanity in Nevada were gathered there. Some of the most worthless, too, but by the time Lunk-head Johnson had been there a year he topped them all. He was dirtier and lazier and hairier than any of them. He lost all hope. His mine was no good and he knew it by that time. He had degenerated into a disreputable ragged old snoozer. He was such a bum that Izzy Bernheimer, who ran the Dog Leg store, would not let him loaf in the store.

The second winter Lunk-head Johnson would have starved if Izzy Bernheimer had not let him have a little sow-belly and a few beans from time to time, but Izzy was kind hearted and did so. Old Lunk-head would come into the store and stand around until he had a chance to edge up to Izzy and say, "Now, I ain't got no food up to my shack—" and Izzy would glare at him a minute and say, "All right! All right!" and cut him off a slab of side-meat and shovel him out a parcel of beans.

"You put it down on my account," Lunk-head would say.

"I should waste my ink!" Izzy would say. "All I ask if you should get out from my store as quick as could be, and stay out."

Old Lunk-head would not say another word. He would look at Izzy like a whipped dog and turn and go out with his shoulders bowed. Sometimes one of the fellows in the store would laugh; sometimes one of them would spit on Lunk-head's ragged boots. He never gave a sign; he was an utterly crushed specimen. He would shuffle back to his one-room shack and sit close to his sheet-iron stove. He had hardly enough ambition to keep from starving from one day to another.

THEN, one day toward the end of winter, Lunk-head Johnson stole a can of salmon from Izzy Bernheimer's shelves. The occasion was the arrival of the stage that ran—sometimes regularly and sometimes not—between Dog Leg and Plasco. This stage was run by Hank Kane and Blister Owens. Hank was a six-footer with a walrus mustache and a weather-worn countenance and gentle blue eyes, and a dead shot with any kind of a gun; Blister Owens was a young fellow of twenty-three or twenty-four. He was a pleasant boy, this Blister, and the general understanding was that he was a younger son of worth-while people back East, roughing it out there in Nevada because he had got into some sort of trouble and because he liked the life. Hank Kane had taken a great fancy to him and they were a queer couple—no one as reluctant of speech as Hank, and no one as boyishly talkative as Blister Owens.

At any rate, the stage got through this day and Hank Kane pulled up his four horses in front of Izzy Bernheimer's store and Blister jumped down and pulled out the mail-bag and hustled it into the store. Izzy was the postmaster and had the post-office in the front of his store near the window—a glass fronted rack of pigeon-holes. He took the bag from Blister and went behind the post-office to sort it out.

Most of Dog Leg usually made a bee-line for Izzy's when the stage came in, crowding the front of the store to see if any mail had come for those who expected some or for those who never did get any, and there were fifteen or twenty in front of the post-office when Dizzy dumped out the bag. Izzy had been doling out sow-belly and beans to Lunk-head when the stage arrived and had just pushed the parcel of beans across the counter, but he left Lunk-head there this time without the usual, "And now get out and stay out."

IZZY had just picked up the first letter from the pile when out of the corner of his eye he saw old Lunk-head's hand reach across the counter and grasp a can of salmon. In almost one motion Izzy slapped the letter on top of the post-office, made a leap, and grasped Lunk-head's wrist. With one hand he jerked the can of salmon away from Lunk-head, and with the other he threw Lunk-head's arm violently back across the counter.

By the time Lunk-head stopped staggering backward a dozen hands had grabbed him. Someone hit him on the side of the face with an open hand. He hunched his shoulders and bent his head, and the next moment he was thrown out into the street on the back of his neck.

"Such a business!" Izzy Bernheimer cried as he went back to the post-office. "A bum he is, and all winter I feed him, and now he is a thief also and steals from me a can salmon!"

There was great indignation in the store. Some of the fellows wanted to go out and lynch old Lunk-head then and there—hang him up and shoot him full of holes—and they would have done it if they had not been waiting for the mail to be distributed. It was a serious case. Lynching was the penalty for any crime in Dog Leg, from theft to murder, and this crime of Lunk-head's was about as mean as anything could be. He had robbed the man who had been provisioning him all winter and, worse than that, he had smashed the generally understood rule that no one was to do anything to annoy Izzy Bernheimer while he was sorting mail.

Izzy was so mad he forgot entirely the letter he had slapped on top of the post-office. He went on sorting the mail and the letter lay forgotten for many days. It was the only letter than had come for Lunk-head Johnson for many months.

THAT evening the informal committee that was all the government Dog Leg had met in Izzy Bernheimer's store to decide what to do about Lunk-head. This committee was made up of what

might be called the respectability of Dog Leg, the men Izzy allowed to loaf in the store—a rough and ready bunch of whiskered and bearded fellows but no out-and-out murderers—and after a lot of confab and opinion it was decided that, as long as Izzy did not want to press the matter, they would not hang Lunk-head but merely kick him out of camp.

They would have kicked Lunk-head out of Dog Leg that night or the next day if Izzy had not put in another plea for him,

"You should listen once," he pleaded. "Winter it is yet, and this Lunk-head he ain't so young any more. He ain't so

healthy, maybe, such a few sow-belly and beans he is eating all winter. Where does he go when we kick him out from Dog Leg?"

"Who cares?" asked One-eye Simmons.

"Maybe nobody," said Izzy, "but it ain't so good that Dog Leg sends out an old feller to die from cold and starving when he don't steal but a can salmon which he don't get away with even. Rather I should make him a present of two can salmon than them fellers at Plasco or wherever finds him dead and says, 'Look once! for a can of salmon them Dog Leg devils let an old man freeze to death.'"

"What you want us to do then, Izzy?" One-eye Simmons asked.

"Kick him out, yes," said Izzy. "For such a bum we ain't got no use in Dog Leg. But we could wait till spring and it don't hurt nobody."

SO THAT was agreed. Lunk-head Johnson became a pariah and an outcast in Dog Leg. Nobody spoke to him, nobody had anything to do with him. There was no jail, but his shack was his jail; there was nowhere for him to go. The old reprobate kept to his shack, waiting for the day when Dog Leg would come and speed him on his way with a kick. And then the thaw came.

The thaw came with a rush. One day it was winter and the next day the warm wind came from the south and the snow began to melt. By the next day rain came. Everything was wet, the road was a river, the canyon creek was a raging river, every gully was a river.

Hank Kane and Blister Owens had gone down to Plasco with their stage before the thaw and nobody expected them to attempt the up trip for two weeks, three weeks or a month, but a week after the thaw they reached Dog Leg. They had borrowed a pair of mules at Plasco, but even with their four good horses and the mules it had been all they could do to get through. The stage was mud from tire to top and their beasts were mud from hoof to ear tip. Twice the stage had overturned; half a dozen times it had stuck in the mud; again and again it had almost gone over the edge into the canyon. But Hank and Blister had fought through. They were all but exhausted when they pulled up in front of Izzy Bernheimer's store. Izzy himself came out front.

"Was you crazy or what, such a road coming by?" he asked as Blister handed him the mail bag. "What comes that you make the trip now? Is it a war or something?"

"There's hell to pay, Izzy," Blister said, wiping a blob of mud off his chin. "We just had to come through. Has Lunk-head Johnson been chased out yet?"

"Not yet."

"Thank God for that!" Blister exclaimed.

THE stage-greeting crowd was gathering and the questions began but Blister cut them short.

"Give us a chance, fellers," he begged. "Hank and me are mighty near played out. Leave us get some mud off us and some grub into us."

Hank Kane put in his plea for a chance to get cleaned up and fed, too. He turned his animals over to a couple of the men, begging them to feed the beasts and rub them down.

"We won't take no longer than we have to," Hank said. "We didn't bust through all that mud to waste time when we got here. Give us half and hour——"

"An hour," said Blister. "I'm going to eat for half an hour."

"Give us an hour," said Hank. "And them of you that wants to do what is right and proper meet us here in Izzy's store. And fetch Lunk-head. That's who is the meat in this nut—Lunk-head Johnson."

An hour later they were all there. The store was so crowded with the manhood of Dog Leg that men not only sat on the counters but stood on it. In a choice location close to the stove old Lunk-head sat in a chair, close guarded by One-eye Simmons and Snap Canahan. The old man was slumped down, indifferent to his fate, his eyes closed. He did not care what happened to him now. Lynching or being kicked out were all the same to him.

Hank Kane and Blister Owens came in from Billy's Star Restaurant and pushed their way through the crowd to the stove where Izzy Bernheimer was standing. Hank was pulling the end of his walrus mustache and Blister was rubbing the back of his neck as he did when serious and thoughtful, and both had the countenances of men who have heavy business on hand and know it. The men around the stove made room for them.

"You tell 'em, Hank," Blister said, and Kane looked at old Lunk-head a moment and then at the crowd.

"Well, boys," he began slowly, "I reckon you know mighty well that me and Blister wouldn't be dumb fool enough to try to yank that stage through from Plasco in a thaw if there wasn't a reason for it. We might have come through and we might be down there in the canyon somewhere, the both of us dead. The chances was just about even. We took them chances and we're here."

"We had to get here," said Blister. "There wasn't no two ways about it."

"Because," said Hank Kane, "it seems like that when we got down to Plasco there was a girl there—a young female girl. She had come into Plasco on Ben Hurley's stage, and she was waiting there for me and Blister to come with the stage and fetch her to Dog Leg."

"But we didn't fetch her," said Blister.

"No, sir," agreed Hank Kane. "We didn't do so. God and this here thaw gave us a chance to say we wouldn't fetch a female lady up this canyon on no account till the road cleared up. We said it was death for a female to chance it—and so it might well be. So said one and all at Plasco which she appealed to."

"So me and Hank come on through alone," said Blister Owens.

"Because," continued Hank, taking a chew of tobacco from his plug, "we wasn't going to fetch this Marjorie Manners to Dog Leg until we put the proposition to you fellers and see what you wanted to do about it."

AT THE mention of Marjorie Manners old Lunk-head raised his hair-tangled head and looked at Hank Kane. His hand came up and clawed at his whiskers, and he opened his mouth as if to speak, but Hank Kane was going on.

"Miss Marjorie Manners, that's what her name is," Hank said, "and the hell of it is, fellers, she says she's the niece of this Lunk-head Johnson here, and I got to believe it. She told us as how her ma had died, which was this old snoozer's sister, and how this Lunk-head is the only folks she has got."

"She was coming up to live with him, and do for him in his shack," said Blister Owens. "Uncle Peter she calls him, and says he's a miner and likely prosperous, seeing as he used to send money home to his sister once, till his sister didn't need it no more."

"And, gents," said Hank, "human heart couldn't bear to think of that nice sweet girl coming up here and finding that her Uncle Peter was a dirty old busted bum on the edge of being kicked out of camp. Human heart couldn't stand to think of it."

"Not when she was that kind of a girl," said Blister Owens. "She ain't no mining camp kind. She ain't no wind-dried female like them at Plasco. She's like a little tender rose, fellers."

"Like a mayflower, more, Blister," Kane corrected him. "She ain't got a thorn nowhere. Sweet, that's what she is. And tender. Gentle. And full of hope and gladness that she's going to be with her Uncle Peter—the ring-tailed old diplodicus yonder."

"We seen it wouldn't do," said Blister. "It would bust her heart wide open."

Izzy Bernheimer turned to old Lunk-head.

"What you know about it?" he asked.

"Nothing," Lunk-head said. "Nothing. I have a niece and that's her name. I didn't know she was coming. I did not know her mother was dead. I got no word."

Izzy stared at him a moment. Then he slapped his hand to his head.

"Help me, Moses!" he exclaimed. "A letter comes, sure enough. In my hand I have it when this feller steals a can of salmon. I put it—Ben Fuller, is a letter on top of the post-office yet?"

Ben Fuller, standing on the counter by the post-office partition looked. He found the letter.

"Here," he said. "'Mr. Peter Johnson,'" and he handed the letter to one of the men, and it passed down the line until Izzy handed it to Lunk-head. The old man tore it open. He held it far from his weak eyes and read it.

"It's like you say, Hank," he said. "She's coming. Marjorie is coming. Her ma is dead and she's coming, Marjorie is," and he handed the letter to Izzy Bernheimer. The store-keeper read the letter aloud. No sound disturbed the store as he read. It was an affectionate letter such as a young girl still grieving for her mother would write. Tears stood in some of the tough old miners' eyes as they listened, for no one but an innocent young girl could have written such a letter—a girl unsullied by the sin and harshness of the world these men knew.

WHEN Izzy read the closing words of the letter—"Your loving niece, Marjorie"—his voice trembled and he put one hand for a moment across his eyes. He could not speak. He was too deeply affected. It was Hank Kane, standing by the stove facing the men whose stern countenances indicated their appreciation of the seriousness of the occasion, who spoke.

"Well, fellers," he said, pulling at his mustache, "there's how she is. That's how she stands. I reckon you can see now why me and Blister come busting through to get to Dog Leg before that sweet young innocent girl could get here. Fellers, no human man that wasn't a filthy coyote would want that tender young girl to come here and find her uncle was a low-down no-good salmon-stealing son of a sawbuck like this Lunk-head here."

"No, by criminy!" declared Blister Owens. "It wouldn't be right nor yet decent."

"And that's why me and Blister come through," continued Hank Kane. "That's why we left that young sweet girl there and wallowed up here through that mud and all. We come to give fair warning she was coming, so as you could run this Lunk-head out of camp afore she got here."

He shook his head emphatically and tugged at his mustache again.

"Or hang him for stealing that can of salmon," he added. "I don't care which so long as we get shut of him in ample time."

"Before she gets here," said Blister Owens, "and gets her heart broke seeing what a cussed old rip he is."

Old Lunk-head had sunk down in his chair again. He heaved a sort of gusty sigh with his eyes closed, and made a futile gesture with his hand as if to say

it was all the same with him. Izzy was still holding the letter.

"Boys," Izzy said, "you have heard what our good friend Hank says."

"Hang the old rooster," someone in the store shouted.

"Run him out of camp," shouted another.

"Hold on, now," One-eye Simmons said. "Where's he going to go if we run the old snoozer out of camp? There ain't no ways for him to go but to Plasco, is there? This here Marjorie is going to meet up with him if he goes there, ain't she? I say string him up and get done with him."

"String him up! Yank him to kingdom-come! Hang him!" men shouted here and there.

"I'm ready, boys," Lunk-head said. "It don't make no difference to me. I'm nothing but a played out old wreck with nothing to look forward to. Do what you want to."

"A trial!" someone shouted. "Give him a trial right here and now and get shut of him. One-eye Simmons be judge."

I'M RIGHT pleased and honored, boys," said One-eye Simmons. "This here court of Dog Leg will come unto order, and let us proceed all neat and orderly. Lunk-head Johnson, you are at this here bar of justice for to be tried according to the rules and regulations as upheld in Dog Leg off and on and more or less. You are accused of—what's he accused of, fellers?"

"Stealing," said one of the men. "He went and stole a can of salmon from Izzy whilst Izzy was sorting the mail."

"Izzy Bernheimer will give testimony and testify to the crime as named and stated," said One-eye. "Did this here old wallopus steal a can of salmon from you, Izzy?"

"No," said Izzy. "He don't steal nothing from me. Maybe he picks up a can salmon but I don't know does he only want to look at the picture from fish on the label or what. He don't steal no can salmon."

"Now, hold on!" said One-eye. "This here trial ain't going to get nowhere if he ain't stole nothing."

"Well, I got to tell it the truth, ain't I?" asked Izzy.

"Why, sure, sure!" One-eye said. "Ain't he stole nothing from you?"

"Nothing."

"Well, boys," said One-eye, "it looks like that crime wasn't no crime. Has anybody got any other complaint of crimes or misdemeanors to make against this here Lunk-head Johnson?"

No one spoke up. There was no crime to charge Lunk-head with. Crimes and misdemeanors—unless he had indeed meant to steal the can of salmon—were not his trouble; his trouble was poverty and discouragement. One-eye Simmons waited a minute or two; he did not know what to do. He scratched his ear.

"Lunk-head Johnson," he said then, "this court declares you free and guiltless of the crime you was hereby charged with, and I'm cussed sorry for it." He scratched his ear again. "Boys," he asked,

"what in tunket are you going to do with the old geezer now?"

Some called out, "Hang him!" despite the verdict, and some shouted, "Run him out!" but Izzy Bernheimer and Hank Kane and Blister Owens had their heads together.

"You should wait a moment," Izzy said to the crowd, and went on with his confab with the stage driver and Blister. They called One-eye Simmons into the consultation and the four talked and seemed to reach an agreement. One-eye faced the men of Dog Leg again.

"Well, boys," he said, "the four of us here have had a talk together and—seeing as there are more of the men of Dog Leg here than mostly gets together at one time—Izzy here says to put a proposition up to you. This here camp has been going along sort of hit-and-miss without no organization, and it's about time we got organized and was something. Will somebody make a motion that the Town of Dog Leg be and is organized?"

The motion was put and carried with cheers.

"The next thing," said One-eye, "is to elect a mayor of this good and growing metropolis of Dog Leg. We've got to have a mayor that can give time to seeing this town is cleaned up and kept all nice and respectable and so that the citizens are decent and respectable likewise. And the first thing the mayor has got to do is to handle this here case of Lunk-head Johnson."

"I move that Dog Leg have a mayor," said Hank Kane, "and that he do like you say, and that he be paid fifty dollars a month for doing it."

THE motion was carried with a yell.

"I nominate Izzy Bernheimer for mayor," some man shouted, and the whole crowd seconded the nomination enthusiastically. Izzy held up a restraining hand.

"Gentlemens," he said, "I got it in my heart a feeling I could not tell you to have such an honor like you would give me. But I couldn't do it. I got me my store what takes all my time, and I was postmaster already and could not your mayor be. Also we got it here a man has time to do the job, what ain't got no mine worth nothing. I nominate this, now, Lunk-head Johnson."

"Second that nomination," said Hank Kane and Blister Owens in unison.

"And I'll let him have a suit of clothes and pair of shoes and a couple shirts which he pays when he gets his salary also," said Izzy. "He ain't no such bad feller, this Lunk-head, only he got it such bad luck."

"You heard the nomination," said One-eye Simmons. "All you that wants this Lunk-head made mayor, and cleaned up, and fixed so this Marjorie niece of his'n won't be all-cussed ashamed of him, say so."

They said so with another yell. For a minute or two old Lunk-head seemed dazed. Then he stood up and he was like a new man. He held his head high, and threw back his shoulders, and his eyes shone with the light of pride and new hope.

"Boys!" he said, and his voice choked with emotion. "Boys! Fellow citizens ——"

He could not go on. He struggled for words.

"Boys," he began again, "I'll make a good mayor for you. I'll——"

He stopped again. Hank Kane was patting him on the back. Blister Owens was shaking his hand.

"Boys——" said old Lunk-head again.

"Quiet!" Izzy called. "The mayor was going to say something."

"Boys," said old Lunk-head, "who'll loan me a dollar? I'm going to get me a shave and a hair-cut."

The regeneration of Lunk-head Johnson had begun.

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ON THE TRAIL

THE STORY SO FAR

THE Nueces Strip is an area of land 100 miles wide by 300 miles long, situated between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande in southwest Texas; in more recent times it has become famed as the home district of Vice President John N. Garner; in earlier days it was noted as the refuge of wanted men from every point of the compass, the Nueces River being universally known as "The Sheriff's Deadline," beyond which there was for about twenty years hardly a semblance of constituted law.

In the beginning, this semi-tropical paradise had been granted by the Spanish king to a half-dozen powerful families who, with the early Franciscan missionaries, bred in the vicinity the first herd of longhorn cattle on the American continent. With annexation of Texas to the United States, these powerful Spanish grantees, backed by the Mexican Government, insisted that the Nueces River be the western boundary of Texas, and their resistance directly led to the war with Mexico, at conclusion of which the Rio Grande was made the boundary and these rich lands brought into Texas, along with the Salt Lakes, the biggest deposit of salt then known.

Most of these grantees acquiesced; but one, Juan Nepomucean Cortinas, resisted. Ten years later when 20,000 Americans had settled in the Strip, Cortinas launched his no-quarter war to uproot the Americans and drive them back to the Nueces. In a five-months' campaign he captured three cities, two government forts, and killed 1,000 persons, just as the first guns of the Civil War began booming.

The mouth of the Rio Grande became the "back door" of the confederacy and the only port not blockaded, Brownsville became the center of a teeming,

OF 5100 OUTLAWS

By George Durham

As told to

Clyde Wantland

Captain McNelly and the Taylor-Sutton Feud.

turbulent, wild community of 100,000 traders, teamsters, sailors, freebooters and what not. Cortinas, once a common badman and bandit, became a powerful political leader on the Mexican bank of the Rio Grande.

The Civil War created an active market for the 6,000,000 longhorn cattle in the vicinity of the Nueces Strip; once considered a nuisance, they were now worth up to $15 per head and belonged to "anybody with a rope, a branding iron and some nerve."

Cortinas organized to get his share of these longhorns. He, as charged by the Congress of the United States, "systematized depredatory war." His ruthlessness and genius brought into existence the biggest organized band of outlaws ever to operate in the United States. He licensed more than 3,000 reckless and desperate men to raid in Texas for him. They came over in bands of 50 to 100 armed men; they defied the law brazenly and openly for ten years as they rustled 900,000 head of cattle.

A half-dozen companies of Texas Rangers were sent against them to no avail. Finally, in 1874, the Texas legislature voted a special commission to Captain Lee H. McNelly, a twenty-five-year-old Virginian, who had led the Texas scouts and spies during the war in Louisiana. McNelly was awaiting funds to pay his men when the bandits executed their boldest stroke by raiding inland more than 100 miles, burning the store of Dad Noakes at Nuecestown, holding a dozen leading citizens as hostages and killing more than a score of innocent persons.

OVERNIGHT, almost, Captain McNelly sprang into action, recruiting forty-two men, mostly beardless boys. Farmers gave horses and saddles where needed; Corpus Christi merchants gave rifles and ammunition. Sixty days later a raiding band of fifty men was discovered with 500 cattle. McNelly led fifteen of his men against them; most of the bandits ran for the river; sixteen of them elected to fight it out. Every bandit who stood for the fight was killed and their bodies stacked on Market Plaza in Brownsville —as the forces of the law, for the first time, accepted the challenge of organized banditry along the Rio Grande.

For a while after the first battle the outlaws managed to avoid further big defeats until McNelly, in defiance of War Department orders trailed a bunch of them who had just put five hundred cattle across the river, into Mexico. There at Los Cuevos, the captain and his men administered punishment to a vastly superior force and compelled them to drive as many of the stolen cattle as were still available back across the river.

Nothing big happened for some time, after that. Plenty of patrols and riding, but no big battles. McNelly went to Washington to iron things out. General Diaz had taken over Mexico and pensioned Cortinas on a big hacienda away from the Border. That part of the

This heretofore unpublished exciting history of McNelly's Rangers is not the last you will read from Clyde Wantland's pen. Watch future issues for more.

country seemed to be pretty well cleaned up, so McNelly decided to go after the famous King Fisher who had him a little empire all his own up around Eagle Pass.

The captain got that job done in his usual form. He arrested and jailed King Fisher, though the popular outlaw was soon released, and lived to become a respected and law-abiding rancher, and died in El Paso trying to save his friend, Ben Thompson, from the results of Ben's own foolhardy acts.

It began to look, there in the fall of 1876, and the spring of 1877, like there was nothing much left for the Rangers to do, except little town marshal work; such as guarding prisoners, arresting rampaging badmen here and there, and such. The fact is that McNelly's name had grown so big that none of us from his outfit ever needed to even lift a gun from its holster. When a couple of us hit one of them Nueces towns the word would spread and things would get quiet.

I was stationed in San Antonio with a detail. And Captain made all of us shuck off our brush clothes and go down to Pancoast, the tailor, and have us the best of town suits made; and go to Lucchese and have us some new boots. And we bought neckties and wore them. Unless you knowed our faces you couldn't tell us from a store clerk or a soda jerker.

And I was getting tired of this; getting tired of arresting men wanted back in New York or some Yankee state; having their women folks cry and take on when we took them. I was about ready to go ask Captain McNelly for my discharge when the old Taylor-Sutton fued flared up in DeWitt County with a new killing.

And Captain got up off his sick bed to take us down there and settle that feud that had then cost 150 lives.

THE Taylors and Suttons were both Georgia families. They come to Texas from my section of the country.

Back at home I had heard my folks talk about this ancient family fight. I think they brought it from the Carolinas to Georgia. At least everybody in Georgia knowed about the old Taylor-Sutton feud.

It warmed up good in Georgia in the '40s. Death always had a race with the stork in that fight. Sometimes the stork would get a few laps ahead, and one side or the other would be on top; then things would get in reverse, and their men folks would thin down to nothing.

What it all started about no one seemed to know; not even the Taylors or the Suttons. And it didn't matter. It more'n likely started over a speckled shoat or a whiskey still. A Sutton killed a Taylor; then Taylor's sons began killing Suttons. Maybe. Or the other way around. I was raised among them family feuds and I've never yet knowed what started one of them.

In them old days family hates was handed down from father to son. A man baby was welcomed into the world not so much because he might become President as because he might be the one to get the man that had done some of his ancestors wrong. I growed up that way, and I thank Captain McNelly for changing me. His idea was, if there was a fight due, hunt up the party right now; have it out—and then forget it. That way is better than feuds handed down from father to son.

But the Taylors and the Suttons, of course, done things the old way. They fought in the Carolinas; they fought and killed in Georgia. And, when the Taylors had run short of man power, they migrated to Texas in the early '40s and settled in DeWitt County; ready, looked like, to quit the fight. Then the Suttons come right in after them and they settled in DeWitt County; and pretty soon the feud was going full tilt.

Captain McNelly knowed pretty well the background of this feud. You see, when he come from his home in Virginia he settled in Washington County, right across the line from DeWitt County. After the Civil War was over he come back to Washington County and married the daughter of the man he used to work for.

But, every year or so, he was called back into harness as a peace officer; and finally, in 1870, he was asked by the Republican Governor Davis to form and organize and handle a force of state police; he was made head of the entire system of Texas mounted police. He organized the force and got it going and then resigned because he wouldn't work for no damn Republican longer than was necessary.

BUT in all this he had gone into DeWitt County more than once and made arrests and tried to take them Taylors and Suttons off each other's necks. And once, a bunch of Sutton fighters—the Pierce boys—captured McNelly. He was called from his home one night to protect a prisoner. In his hurry of leaving he told his wife to get his gun, and she made a mistake and slipped a little old two-shot derringer in his holster.

The crowd was getting ready to lynch the prisoner. And the captain, seeing he could only get two of them, agreed to take the prisoner's place. He was that way.

The crowd agreed and begin looking for a tree.

"Dammit," Captain said, "why do you have to look for a tree when you got a man to kill? You've all got guns. I'm not fighting back. I'm your man. One of you take out a gun and kill me."

That mob fingered triggers and unholstered guns. But no one took the shot. Finally one of the Pierce boys—and there was six of 'em—come forward. This was Old Shanghai Pierce.

"You know damn well, Captain," he said, "there ain't a man in this crowd that could hold a gun on you and pull the trigger. You take it too easy. If you'll agree to be blindfolded and let six or eight of us shoot——"

"No," Captain said. He told me later that in the war he learned that even a firing squad could not pull the trigger on a man that was looking them in the eye. He said that was the reason they had to blindfold a man before they could shoot him.

He would bet you any money, or even old Segal, his favorite mount, that you couldn't hit him at ten paces if he could get your eye. And damned if he didn't prove it on more than one occasion.

He won Old Shanghai there and then. He took him into camp. And Old Shanghai brung in his brothers.

Shanghai had two pistols, and he passed one across to Captain. And then he told the rest of the mob that they was dismissed unless they wanted to shoot it out with the Pierce boys and Captain McNelly.

And Captain wiggled out of that mighty close place. But he promised Shanghai that he would never forget it; and that he would never, in all the life yet coming to him, bother either Shanghai or his brothers.

Now, six or seven years later, when he was taking in his company of Texas Rangers to clean up the country where the Pierce boys was mighty prominent, Captain never forgot that promise. He was right now the biggest man in Texas. He was the most feared man in the United States. Presidents and Governors and judges took his word for anything. When even me, one of his lowliest hired hands, rode into a town even as big as San Antonio, women and kids run out in the streets just to see me. They didn't know my name; they didn't care a damn. All they wanted to know was that I was one of McNelly's men.

Any man but Captain McNelly might have forgot that promise to the Pierce boys. But now he told us the circumstances; told us his promise; and told us to make it good if any of the Pierce boys come in our line of fire.

"I made it," he said, "when I was in a tight place. But I made it. And I wish you boys would help me keep it. Before you shoot one of them Pierce boys, tell them you're from this outfit; and I think they'll lay down to you. Then bring them in to me."

WHAT brought the Taylor-Sutton feud back into focus at this time was the brutal killing of Old Doctor Brazell and his young son, Jeff. The old doctor answered a call at his home one night late; was lured away with his boy and assassinated.

Judge Henry Clay Pleasants was doing his dead level best at that time to convene a court there and get the wheels of justice in motion. In fact Judge had been trying to do that thing for a number of years. But he had not been able to get a jury together. Witnesses had been intimidated and murdered. Prospective jurors had shied off; and, in fact the county was evenly divided into two factions so that no jury could be found that wasn't strongly partisan as well as lined up with one side or the other.

In them days the community doctor usually knowed more about what was going on than any one else; although they hardly ever talked. But it was not unusual for them to be blindfolded, led into the brush to treat a man and then blindfolded and led out again. Sooner or later Doctor Brazell had come in con-

tact with lots of members of both sides; and he knew a lot.

He had been summoned as a witness before a court of inquiry called by Judge Pleasants; and then he had been called out and murdered in cold blood.

It was then that Judge Pleasants sent out a call for Captain McNelly.

The outfit was pretty well scattered then. Some was working out of San Antonio; some out of Corpus Christi. Others here and there. We was making a sort of roundup of Southwest Texas; working mostly in pairs.

But at the captain's order we assembled about twenty men under Lieutenant Hall at Victoria and from there we moved on Clinton, then the county seat of DeWitt County.

Captain come down from San Antonio and met us and told us what he wanted done. I have tried to give a picture of the captain when at his best; and I am not going to tell much about him now. He had burned himself down in that fourteen months on the river. Day and night in the saddle; mesquite beans for rations was more than he could carry that long; and it was more than most of them under him could carry. Only about half the old outfit was still in harness. And Captain, only thirty years old now, was only a shadow. But the old fire was still burning.

"There is more outlawry here," he said, "than there was down on the river. And I want you boys to clean it up. Some of the county peace officers are the worst offenders. So don't show favors nor fear. And don't waste any ammunition."

It now only lacked four days of being Christmas, 1876.

The captain went into Clinton and hid us out in the brush. The next day he come out to camp and told Lieutenant Hall that there was a big wedding party slated for Christmas Eve; that Deputy Sheriff Joe Sitterlee was to be married; and that there was to be a big Cowboys' Christmas Ball.

"More'n likely," Captain told Hall, "you can round up the men you want at this ball. That'll beat rounding them up in the country; so just lay low until the night of the big blow-out then round it up."

That night, we went into hiding and come out after dark the night before Christmas. And Hall took us up within two hundred yards of the big ranch house where the festivities was under way. He dismounted us and formed us in a circle to close in at his command.

Inside a real old-time Cowboys' Christmas dance was going on and about 100 men and women were present. The parlor was cleared for action and the couples swirled in one of them colorful dances. A fiddler and bass viol boomed from the corner; and the caller:

"His rig was kinder careless—big spurs and high heeled boots;
He had the reputation that comes when fellers shoots.
His voice was like the bugle upon the mountain heights;
His feet was animated and a mighty moving sight.
He begun to holler, now fellers shake your pins;
Lock horns to all them heifers and rustle 'em like men;
Saloot your lovely critter; now swing and let 'em go!
Climb the grapevine round 'em; now all hands do-si-do.
You mavericks jine the roundup! Skip the waterfall!
Whirl 'em like you allus do at the Cowboys' Christmas Ball. . . ."

THE wedding had come off an hour or so before. And now Deputy Sheriff Joe Sitterlee and his bride, as the center of the festivities was given the floor to themselves for the final whirl that was to end that dance. The other couples ranged themselves around the wall and then waltzed in closer, their hands clapping, their feet shuffling to the moving tunes of *Oh! Suzanna!* as Joe led his bride of an hour up and down that floor; her bridal train swirling as Joe spun her in one of them Spanish flourishes and crushed her to him for the kiss that closed it.

As they waltzed to this colorful, stompeding close, Lieutenant Hall throwed a shell in the chamber of his Winchester; thumbed the hammer back and stepped up onto the gallery; into the light of the open door. And then stopped.

As he hove into view he said simply, "We're McNelly's Rangers."

The fiddle give a final squeak and the old fiddler gathered it under his

arms and dived for the window; the big bass viol player left his instrument tumbled in the corner and followed.

The women seemed trained for these sudden emergencies. Just like water parting from oil, they gathered to one side of the big room; the men ranged around the other side.

From what we could see from the outside it looked like every man in there wore at least one pistol. In fact, in them days, a man was not dressed up without at least one pistol. And these boys was sure dressed up in their Sunday best. This was the big event of the year as it always was in any part of the cow-country; the Cowboys' Christmas Ball was the center of the frontier social season. And tonight Deputy Sheriff Joe Sitterlee was getting married! This was a big event.

Finally, the men was ready and someone growled, "what the hell you mean, hornin' in on this party?"

"We're arresting the murderers of Dr. Brazell. That's all we want."

Sitterlee, with his bride still hanging on his arm said, "you'll damn sure have to take us. We ain't coming."

"I didn't expect you to," said Hall. "I'm prepared to take you." Then he warned them: "Don't no one but women and children try to leave. You men clear out the women and children; and say when you're ready."

The roomful of men stampeded toward Hall and he had to hold his fire and back out on the gallery.

"How many men you got," demanded Sitterlee.

"Sixteen," said Hall.

"We got fifty," Sitterlee snarled, "and we'll fight it out."

"All right," Hall shot back, "clear the women and kids. I'll give you three minutes to be ready." Then he called out into the dark, "get ready, men. You with shotguns sweep the galleries when I give the word. You with Winchesters shoot through the windows. And don't waste ammunition." That last sounded awful much like Captain McNelly.

Bill Meadows, the ringleader, was full mad and about half-drunk, and he begun blubbering like them kind will.

"We don't want to kill all you Rangers," he said, "come on and let's talk sense." He had arrived right in front of Hall and the lieutenant took him at his word.

"Of course you don't," he said and snatched Bill's pistol from its holster and tossed it back into the dark. That was, of course, the signal for us to come in fast and we did. Bill Meadows had his hands in the air and fifty other pair followed his. We must have collected a gunny sackful of pistols from that crowd.

It was all over in five minutes and not a shot was fired.

"This is a hell of a wedding party," Sitterlee wailed. "Here I've jest been married and it's Christmas and enough vittels and likker to last all night." Then he looked at Hall and said, "Say Lieutenant, how about letting the party go on and you all have a bite to eat and a little of the likker and make a good Christmas Eve night of it? Maybe this'll be our last one!"

Hall agreed on condition.

"I'm placin' seven of you men under arrest," he said. "You, Joe Sitterlee; Bill Meadows, the marshal of Cuero; Dave Augustine, Jake Ryan, Bill Cox, Frank Heister and Charley Diedrichs. You're under arrest on a murder charge. Now, if all of you will agree to not try and help these prisoners make a break during the night; will not try any foolishness, I'll throw a guard around the house and the prisoners can stay until the party is over in the morning."

"That's a go," the men chorused.

WE STAYED all night, changing guards every two hours. And us that wasn't on guard had quite some time in the festivities. The prisoners, after the first excitement wore off, paid little attention to the arrest; they was not aiming to make any desperate effort to get away. It had been so long since the law had defied them they had got the habit of thinking they could not be kept in jail more than a few minutes.

In fact, during the night they all arranged to make bond the next morning. Their friends promised to go with them to the jail.

At daybreak we took them to the jail at Clinton; and Lieutenant Hall placed us in guard details of four to guard them day and night.

And Captain McNelly was with Judge Pleasants; giving that fine old judge

assurance that every order of the court would be carried out to the letter; and also assuring him that he could open his court now any time he wanted to. We heard that the regular court had not opened with a jury and all now for nine years.

Captain McNelly now put himself and three of us boys as a personal guard over the person of Judge Pleasants. And wherever the Judge went, we was with him; Captain McNelly handling it personally, which made it look like something was in the air.

The prisoners was quite surprised when, at their first hearing, the next day they was held without bond. Then their lawyers sued out a writ of habeas corpus and brought them before Judge Pleasants; and the old judge, flanked on each side with four Rangers, denied them bond, although some of them offered bond high as $100,000. The backbone of the law was stiffening.

The crowds now begin milling so threatening around the little old jail that Captain ordered the prisoners moved to the second floor of the courthouse; right in the court room; and there was put over them a doubled guard.

On the fourth day the lawyers sued out another writ for bond; and Judge Pleasants set down the hearing for Saturday morning; two days away. Then he begin to be threatened. Word was sent him that if he denied bond to the prisoners Saturday he would never live to get down off the bench.

But, under the spell of Captain McNelly, the old judge defied the lawless powers that had held him and the law in scorn so long.

For the hearing that morning, we herded the prisoners up before the bar and throwed the courtroom open to the public.

"Let them come in," Captain McNelly ordered. And we knowed that Captain was itching for a showdown fight right there in the courtroom. That was his way of answering. He would not let us search them that come.

"Leave their guns alone," he commanded. And we let them in with their hips bulging.

Captain himself escorted Judge Pleasants from his office in the rear and mounted him on the bench; and he had ranged four of us on each side. With the judge in his seat, Captain stepped forward, and in that old commanding voice of his, ordered:

"Rangers! Ready! Load! Aim! This court is now opened. At the first sign of any disturbance from the audience, you Rangers will shoot; and shoot to kill."

In that old defiant way of his, the captain paced before us, with his pistol out and cocked. And Judge Pleasants arose.

"You men," he said, "are a bunch of murderers, bushwhackers and assassins. You have made this county a reproach to the fair name of Texas. You have shot down peaceful men from ambush; you have intimidated the courts and the law. You have sent me word that I would never live to get down from this bench today unless I heeded your threats.

"This court has had to call in the State troops under Captain McNelly to resume the court functions. And the time has now arrived when the court can announce decisions with assurance they will be carried out by the regular constituted officers of the law, without fear or favor. I warn you lawless to beware! The law will triumph! The law will prevail! So long as we have officers like Captain McNelly and his Rangers, the lawless cannot conquer.

"Regarding the prisoners before the bar. It is the decree of the court that they be held without bond to answer the charges of as brutal a murder as was ever committed. And the court therefore commits them to the custody of Captain McNelly for safe keeping; to be held as he sees fit, where he sees fit, and to be held without bond!"

There was curses and threats and murmuring from the crowd out in front; and there was shuffling of feet and squirming. Without the presence of Captain McNelly there would no doubt have been a rush to rescue the prisoners. But the magic of his very presence, the reputation that he now had, was too much.

"Clear the courtroom," Judge Pleasants ordered.

Captain advanced us on the crowd and they melted through the door.

And the law was established in feud-torn DeWitt County.

TWO days later we loaded the seven prisoners in a wagon and took them to Austin; and then a week later, we brought them to San Antonio and placed them in the Bat Cave, the old jail on Military Plaza.

We rounded up some more on murder indictments. One of them, Bill Singleton, was tried in Bee County on a change of venue and sentenced to hang. I was detailed on his death watch. And the day he hung, in April, 1877, he wrote a queer will, giving his skin to the district attorney directing it "be stretched into a drum and beaten at the door of the courthouse every year on the anniversary of my death . . . as a warning to evil doers." The rest of his body he gave to doctors to probe and "find out what made me this kind of a damn fool."

He was hung in front of the jail, and folks from all over that part of the country come to see the execution. That was the first legal hanging ever to be held in that bandit-ridden Nueces town.

Bill smoked a black Mexican cigar as he walked up on the scaffold; and he would bet on anything. As they put the black cap on him he tossed the cigar butt down on the ground and said to me, "I'll bet you ten dollars it goes out before I do."

"In case you lose, Bill," I said, "where'd I come to collect?"

And he pointed "up yonder."

Then they sprung the trap and Bill went out. I watched the cigar butt and him too; and danged if he didn't win that bet! He was still quivering when the cigar went cold!

AFTER hanging Bill Singleton at Beeville, they separated us again; sending me and George Talley down to Banquette. It was just now a few days more than two years since we had come through Banquette with Captain McNelly headed for the Lower Country and that clean-up he made. Two years since old W. Wright had laid them bets on each of us; betting who would stick and who wouldn't.

We was after an old mavericker—one of them brush hands the big outfits paid a dollar a head to slap their brands on mavericks; and who got sorta reckless and slapped brands on stock that he oughta to have left go by, because they already had one brand on them.

Well, we got what we come after; got him and two of his hands. Although we left them where we found them. For some reason or other they did not want to come along.

We was in camp with a cow crowd out west of Banquette. And one rainy day, with things mighty dull, we caught up a gelding that wandered into camp. And, as the pony seemed to have lots of life, some of the boys dropped a loop on him and Talley wropped a tomato can in his tail filled with gravel.

That ain't such a grand trick, and we shouldn't have done it. But we did.

The next day we knowed it was a mistake; because the colt went loco and damaged hisself. And he turned out to be Jess Peters's colt.

Jess come to the bunkhouse and we was playing cards. He knowed me and I knowed him; and I saw he was plenty on the prod.

"Josh," he said to me, "who'n the hell tied that can on my colt's tail, yesterday?"

I throwed down my hand and got up. But before I could speak, Jess continued, "I will whip the damn son of a b—— that done that."

George Talley had done it and George now started to get up. "I done it," he said. Both men flushed red; and both darted for their pistols.

George got in the first shot as he was coming up and hit Jess under the right rib, the bullet ranging to the left and going through his heart; then Jess shot and missed; and George got him a second time in the right temple.

That's the way them old-timers started and ended a fight. It all happened in much less than sixty seconds. Jess Peters laid dead. And George didn't want to face the music.

The Peters clan had lots of money; they was powerful then in Nueces County. So old George Talley saddled up his pony and hit across the country for the river and Mexico.

He didn't come back for forty years; then one day a few years ago he showed up at El Sauz. He didn't tell me where all he'd been or what he'd been doing; but he said he wanted to wipe that off the record. So I helped him some and he stood trial at Corpus Christi and

come clear; which he could have done forty years ago if he had stayed and saved himself forty years of dodging and wearying.

After we got through in DeWitt County, Captain McNelly returned with his family to San Antonio; and went to bed in the Menger Hotel. They said he weighed less than sixty pounds when he died on September 4, 1877, at the age of thirty-one years.

He asked for me, but I didn't go. I couldn't stand to look at him. I wanted to remember him like he was that day when he took us into that Palo Alto fight. And that's the picture I want to leave of him here.

He wasn't the only efficient officer I've ever known; he wasn't the only good Texas Ranger I've ever known. But, fifty years after he's been in his grave, I still think he was in many ways the greatest all around man I've ever seen or heard about.

IN SOME ways I've had a queer sort of life, I reckon. As a fifteen-year-old boy I left my home in Georgia and come to Texas. I have been in Texas now sixty-three years. Three of them years I was on the payroll of McNelly's Texas Rangers; sixty of them years I've been on the payroll of the King Ranch. I believe that I've worked for the two greatest men in their fields that an American frontier ever produced; Captain McNelly, the Texas Ranger; and Captain Richard King, the greatest rancher, I think, that ever lived. There was two men that was men.

I quit Rangering right after Captain McNelly died.

Lieutenant Hall succeeded to command of the outfit; and he was a good man. But I told him one day when he rushed us into a scrape that he knowed nothing about that McNelly could get more work done and kill more bandits with ten men than he could do with fifty. McNelly had brains that Hall and most of the others lacked.

There was a writer took up with Hall in LaSalle County and he wrote some pieces about Hall later on under the name of O. Henry. He got his stuff straight all right. My daughter read me years later, his piece about the Mexican *caballero* that wanted his woman killed, but couldn't do it himself, because a man of his standing couldn't kill a woman.

That was all a piece out of Old Blas's life history. That day when Old Blas appealed to me for help when the posse was on his trail and he wanted to hide out on El Sauz, we talked some, and I asked him about that woman of his and what he done with her years ago; and he told me how he fixed it up so that one of Hall's Rangers, who had beat his time, shot her by mistake at daybreak one morning.

Hall wasn't there; but someone told him and he told the writer; which was something Captain McNelly wouldn't permit us to do. But I reckon it's all right now to tell a few things, like I've done, and get the record straight, as I'm the only one left that can do that. And I'll explain it all to Captain when I join him now most any time Over Yonder.

In that last Roundup, I can look Captain straight in the eye and tell him I ain't broke one of his rules. That I've never used any more force than was necessary to arrest a man; that I've never killed except in line of duty; and that no man has ever spent a night in jail or a day in the penitentiary because of me unless he was clearly guilty of a crime against the law.

And when I tell Captain that, I hope he'll nudge Lieutenant Wright like that day over at Los Cuevos when he saw me taking careful aim before I let the hammer drop and say "that's a pretty damn good kid."

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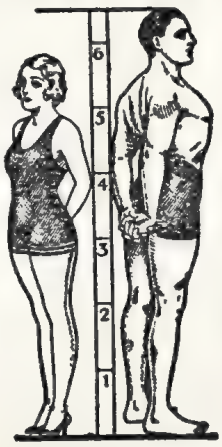

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